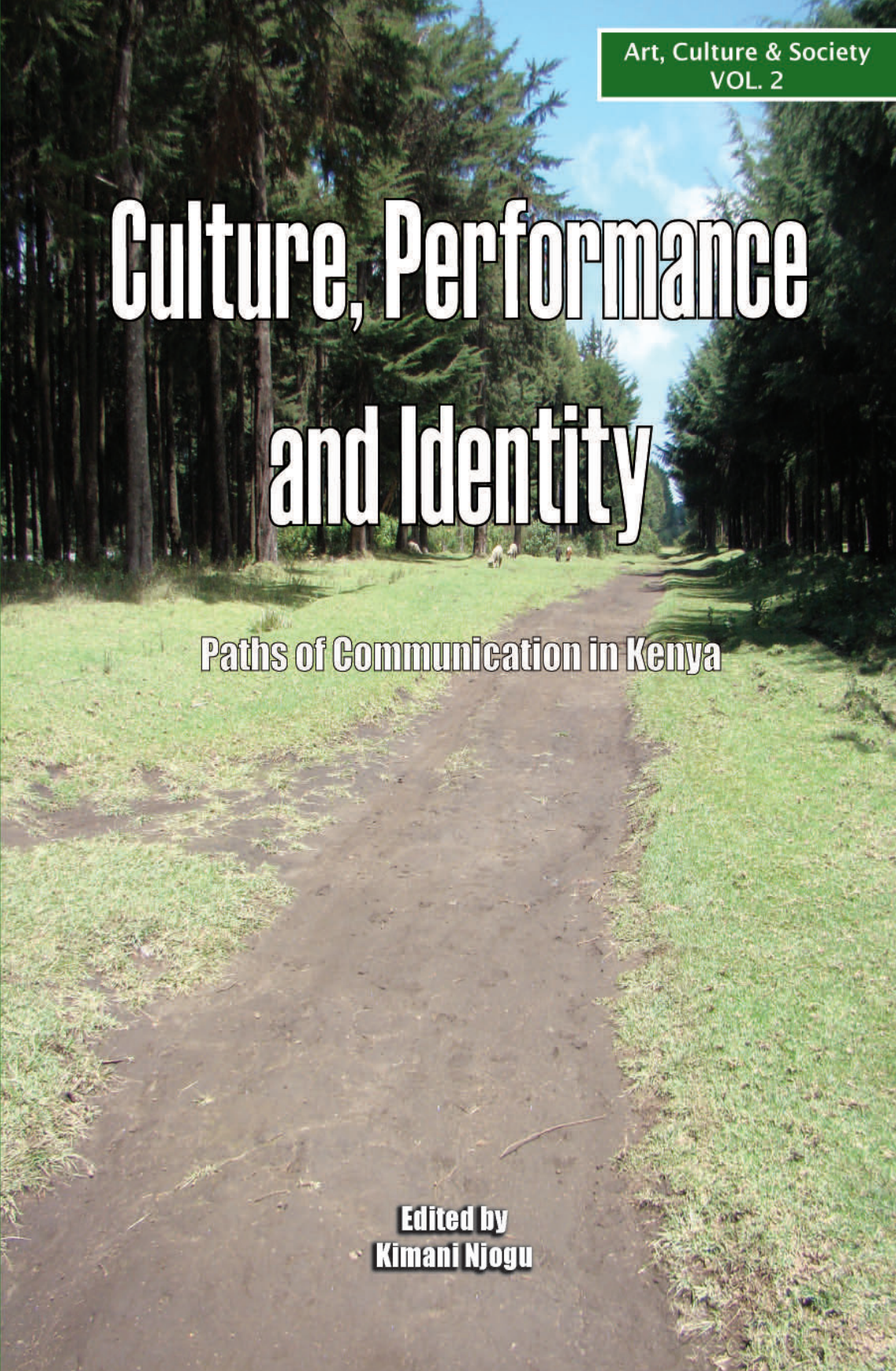




Art, Culture & Society
VOL. 2

Culture, Performance and Identity

Paths of Communication in Kenya

Edited by
Kimani Njogu

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Culture, Performance & Identity

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Published in 2008 by

Twaweza Communications Ltd.,
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Design and Layout by Catherine Bosire
Cover design by Patrick Thirimu

With the support of The Ford Foundation, Office of Eastern Africa

ISBN: **9966-7244-1-9**

Printed in Nairobi, Kenya

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the women and children burnt to death at the Kenya Assemblies of God Church, Kiambaa, near Eldoret Town on January 1, 2008 in post-election violence in Kenya.

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Acknowledgements

This book, the second in our series on *Art, Culture and Society*, brings together important essays on how identity is shaped and performed in Kenya. The ongoing reflections on the relationship between art, culture and society are part of Twaweza Communications Linkages Program. The Program brings together academicians and practitioners to discuss contemporary issues related to arts, culture and media. We are immensely grateful to Dr. Tade Aina, Representative of the Ford Foundation Office of Eastern Africa, Dr. Joyce Nyairo, Program Officer in charge of Media, Arts and Culture and all the Ford Foundation staff for making our work possible. We are also indebted to the participants of the Linkages Workshops from academia and civil society for providing valuable input in our deliberations on the direction of the arts in the region. The sharing of knowledge across intellectual divides will enrich academic work and benefit art and media practitioners in Kenya.

This work has also benefited from Judie Rabar of the Institute of French Research in Africa (IFRA) who provided important editorial assistance and the Editorial Board of the *Jahazi Journal*: Bantu Mwaura, Kwamchetsi Makokha, Garnette Olunya, Pat Kamau, Joyce Njoki and Mueni Lundi. Through formal and informal discussions you have influenced in fundamental ways most of the thoughts in this publication. The team at Twaweza Communications deserves gratitude for organizing the Seminars in which ideas in this Volume were shared. Catherine Bosire designed this publication and I am grateful to her.

Kimani Njogu
Nairobi.

Introduction

For many years, I have undertaken substantial work in exploring the growth of a 'Kenyan' identity through Kiswahili, our national language. In books, media events and teaching, I have taken the view that it is possible to nurture a national identity through Kiswahili, a *lingua franca* that traverses ethnic boundaries in Kenya. This body of work undertaken for a period of over two decades has sought to show that a national identity can co-exist with other forms of identity in mutually enriching ways. In urban settings I have watched in admiration as young artists from different ethnic backgrounds compose and produce lyrics in *sheng*, their slang. Ethnic backgrounds of the youth, in most cases marked only by the names they were given at birth, are put aside. Reading through *Kwani?* Literary Journal, I have become convinced that a Kenyan identity driven principally by youth culture has been emerging. This identity pays little attention to ethno-linguistic considerations in defining the world and manifests itself in a vibrant popular culture that draws from the richness of our diversity. It should be nurtured and given an opportunity to blossom.

But to focus on the growth of a national identity without paying sufficient attention to local processes of interaction and solidarity and the particularity of experience can be grossly misleading if the events that followed the disputed December 27th, 2007 election results in Kenya are anything to go by. Apparently, national identities suppress and mask other identities that could be potentially explosive if found in the mix of political manipulation, economic deprivation, corruption, limitation of freedoms and violation of rights. After the closely contested Kenyan General Election results were announced and President Mwai Kibaki sworn in, violence of unprecedented proportions was unleashed in different parts of the country, but especially in Nyanza and the Rift Valley Province, on communities that voted overwhelmingly for the Party of National Unity (PNU) which had sponsored the President. Disturbingly, members of specific ethnic groups were isolated and either killed or forcefully evicted from their homes. There were many incidences of gang rape and destruction of personal and communal property and

infrastructure. These acts, which were undertaken especially by youth who felt that their aspirations for a new political dispensation had been violated, took an ethnic dimension. They were to a certain extent an expression of deep anger at the government which was seen to have 'rigged' itself into power through manipulation of organs of government. Either as spontaneous and random or organized, militaristic and systematic violence, the mayhem that enveloped Kenya, especially in the Rift Valley, was without doubt a form of ethnic cleansing. Communities were targeted for harm and eviction because of their ethno-linguistic identity manifested in names, physical features, cultural symbols or as represented in their national identity cards. Revenge attacks towards the end of January 2008 in parts of Nairobi and Central Kenya also took an ethnic dimension. Only in a few cases was socio-economic class invoked as motivation for the attacks. In such cases, the economically privileged were said to be 'proud' and 'conceited'.

Although the announcement of the presidential elections on 30th December 2007 was a major contributor to the violence, there were also other underlying issues related to land, inequalities, marginalization, unequal development and assertion of ethnic identities. Indeed, there have been reports that between October – December 2007 oath taking, acquisition of weaponry and militia training were taking place in parts of the Rift Valley and that youth were transported to Eldoret, Kericho and Kipkelion in readiness for violence after the election results. Equally disturbing was the role that the media played in polarizing the country especially between 2005 and 2007. For close to two years, the media became quite partisan in reporting and analysis of national events. Blatant ethnic stereotyping and manipulation of information was evident in electronic and print media. Propaganda and hate messages were unashamedly sent through mobile phones and the internet, paving the way for an extremely tense atmosphere as the country drew close to the polls. The legal fraternity did not provide direction to the country and academicians were recruited to provide guidance to the main political parties in their secretariats. It could be claimed that a set of complex events combined to bring Kenya almost on its knees. These included among others the rigging of votes at polling stations and Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) headquarters; lack of confidence among politicians and voters that the ECK can be transparent, accountable and corruption-free; the language

and demeanour of the Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Kenya as the results slowly trickled in; initial refusal by the government that there were flaws in the process; the publicly cynical position taken by the European Commission Election Observers on the counting and tallying process; the use of generalized slogans by civil society organizations and politicians such as 'No Justice No Peace' which resonated in different ways at the community level (where 'justice' was viewed as synonymous with 'electoral justice' alone) and seemed to rationalize extrajudicial killings and the denial of the right to life for those seen to have voted in a different way; the manipulation of ethnicity by the political elite in order to maintain or acquire power; the failure to uphold the constitution despite its limitations leading to youth militia groups taking over parts of the country; the insincerity and arrogance of politicians from both sides; an angry and frustrated population that felt violated through a flawed election process; lack of faith in the judicial system and the inability of Government to take control of the tense and volatile situation. Though belated, the entry of former United Nations Secretary Kofi Annan and the setting up of a National Dialogue and Reconciliation Committee gave some hope to a profusely bleeding nation. A democratic exercise of choosing political leaders through the ballot became a source of blood and tears across the country.

The destructive events which followed the contested election results suggest to me that when an emerging national identity is viewed as untenable due to perceptions of bias and the collapse of institutions of governance, such as the case of the Electoral Commission of Kenya, individuals will retreat to more local zones of 'belonging' and 'acceptance' which in the case of most African countries rotates around the ethno-linguistic identity. This retreat may also be provisional depending on the efforts put in place to grow a national identity through ownership of the development process and institutions of governance. Loyalty to local zones of comfort seem to override all else when issues under contestation are significantly emotive. In highly charged and emotive national circumstances the tendency is to dichotomize and pigeonhole perspectives on the basis of one's ethnic background and the ability to transcend the norm is generally viewed as 'betrayal' and is an exception.

Throughout the world it is not uncommon to be faced with cases of corruption, gerry-meandering through a redrawing of constituencies and

districts as well as the manipulation of electoral processes and results by ruling parties. But in the case of Africa, these practices have larger implications economically and politically than the more globally hegemonic countries of the North. The power given to the presidency; levels of poverty and unemployment; poor quality of local and national leadership; existence of small arms; political marginalization; unequal trade relations with the North; the uncritical imposition of Western paradigms in local contexts; the pursuit of raw power; and the invocation of ethnicity to acquire and/or maintain group interests are a recipe for chaos and destruction. This is what happened prior to and after the 2007 elections in Kenya.

The elections were also a generational contest between the octogenarian Mwai Kibaki and the younger and media savvy Raila Odinga. Spearheaded by Western public relations companies and intellectuals from universities, the presidential campaigns used traditional and new communications technology to reach voters. Communities were mobilized through popular music, colour, populist rhetoric, media hype and images of grandeur, propaganda and aggressive television advertisements. The youth were also encouraged to participate in bringing about *change* or ensuring *continuity* are artforms with which they relate such as 'hiphop' were used. The main political parties presented their agenda for the youth and succeeded to varying degrees in winning them over. Of particular interest to the youth was how the parties would create employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. The heightened expectation that the electoral process would lead to a generational transition and tangible economic benefits in opposition strongholds may have contributed to the anger and frustration seen after the presidential results were announced, amid accusations of vote rigging. The youth had lost faith in institutions of governance and decided to 'take over' in the best way they knew how. Either through spontaneous or organized action they destroyed by fire, arrows, or bare hands, crude weapons anything that seemed to represent the state in their vicinity.

Although, the administration of Mwai Kibaki (2002-2007) had delivered on the economy by registering a growth which jumped from 0.6% in 2002 to 6.1% in 2006 and unveiled an ambitious Kenya Vision 2030 – a development blue-print to turn Kenya into a newly industrializing

‘middle income country providing high quality of life for all citizens by 2030 – the opposition during the campaigns promised faster growth, eradication of corruption and equity. Economic growth under Kibaki was seen as not trickling down to the general population. The promise of ‘change’ within the context of poverty and deprivation was quite appealing although in reality, there were no tangible policy differences between the major political parties except with reference to devolution of power.

In a discussion on youth, leadership and culture I argue elsewhere (Njogu 2007:18) that at the dawn of independence, nationalist leaders inherited instruments and institutions of governance from the colonial state ‘without concomitant normative institutional or ideological mechanisms which could sufficiently constrain them against abuse of power.’ This invariably led to frustration and alienation because the state was viewed as an imposition on the populace. It was ‘out there’ taking care of the interests of a few. The Kibaki administration attempted to address this problem through the Constituency Development Fund (CDF). Under this scheme the government allocated funds to each constituency annually so that local leaders can determine their priority areas. The scheme has been lauded for taking development to the people through local decision making processes but criticized because the allocated funds are insufficient and give too much power to the sitting member of parliament, as the Chairperson of the Fund.

Since 1962 a *majimbo* system of government has often been floated as a way of bringing government ‘closer to the people’. Used in Kenyan political discourse, *majimbo* refers to regionalism or federalism as a form of political organizing. But in its evolution the term has often been associated with balkanization, ethnic cleansing, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, ‘us’ and ‘them’. The term was invoked again in 2007 as a rallying call for those regions that were viewed to have embraced it. In an article ‘*Forget Naysayers: Majimbo is an Idea whose Time has Come*’ (Daily Nation October 18, 2007) Prof. Anyang Nyong’o equates ‘majimboism’ with ‘devolution’. He also suggests that it would create an ‘equitable and just society.’ From the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC) Reports it would appear that there was consensus across the country that devolution was necessary in order to have wider public participation in governance. The bone of contention has been how devolution is to be understood and

implemented without leading to exclusion and balkanization. In attempt to shed off these negative attributes of the term 'majimbo' the Orange Democratic Movement attempted to replace the word with the Kiswahili 'ugatuzi' (decentralization). The new word did not last long as a concept that would capture the envisaged political system. In any case, decentralization is not devolution.

While appreciating the importance and inevitability of a devolved government, it is necessary to be cynical about the power of a majimbo system *per se* to deliver much needed equity in Kenya, especially as it is currently understood. In any case, before it is implemented extensive civic education and capacity building across the country would need to be undertaken. Rufus Davis writing in *The Federal Principle* has said: “ *The truth of the matter is—and experience has been the teacher—that some ‘federal’ systems fail, some do not;...some inhibit economic growth, some do not;...some promote a great measure of civil liberty, some do not; some are highly adaptive, some are not...whatever their condition at any one time...it is rarely clear that it is so because of their federalness, or the particular character of their federal institutions, or the special way they practice federalism, or in spite of their federalness...*” If Rufus Davis is right, then we can reasonably assume that the majimbo system proposed in Kenya in and of itself may not be a panacea to inequities and injustices in the country. Neither would it obliterate ethnic and regional biases in resource allocation and access to power. Indeed just like the much maligned centralized system of government, a majimbo system of government in Kenya could be equally alienating to citizens if it were to lead to balkanization and the transfer of dictatorial tendencies which are, constantly witnessed at the national level. In order to ensure equity and justice it is imperative to facilitate the growth of a responsible, transparent, trustworthy and accountable leadership that has integrity, tolerance and commitment to serve. By improving the quality of leadership and setting higher benchmarks on those who wield the instruments of power, we are able to develop people-centered institutions of governance. The development of a political culture which is respectful to the electorate and upholds and protects the human rights of all people irrespective of their ethnic background, race, gender or class will become a reality. This type of leadership can be nurtured deliberately during the process of socialization in families, institutions of learning, cultural spaces and so on.

Even as we refocus nationalism as a tool for political and economic platform, it is also important to engage other forms of identity in the country. Individuals do not have a single identity but several based on gender, class, age, language and ethnicity, profession, place of residence, nation-state and so on. When at home with family members we invoke an identity different from that with which engage our professional colleagues or privilege as followers of a specific religion. This recognition that a certain identity, say the ethno-linguistic one, is operational only at certain times in our lives and not in others is important because it points to the fact that we are constantly negotiating who we are in time and space. In other words, people of the same ethno-linguistic group may be quite different when a professional or religious identity is invoked. The recognition of difference in unity also means that *what is shared* between members with one identity and *what is different* are equally important. The priority accorded to any one form of identity is determined by a number of things, including among others, one's sense of security and benefits accruing from the association in time and space. Considering the primacy and value given to the ethno-linguistic identity in parts of Africa, it may be necessary to explore how other identity types find expression in the region and to continually draw attention to them.

From an individual point of view, it is quite tempting to take the position that because identities are partial, external and collectivizing they negate and dislocate the self. One is defined as who he/she is through an extraction of only a part of one self. But because individuals exist in social settings from the day they come into the world they cannot exist independently; they influence and are influenced by social situations. Identities are provisional and partial; not absolute attributes. If identity was a fragile and delicate component of cultural belonging and collective treasure inherited from the past, only fragments and traces of it remain with the acceleration of regional and global interconnections. Loyalty to those fragments can be strong in certain cases as has been witnessed among emigrants in the North. Furthermore, cultural products especially from the West have been exported to the rest of the world challenging identities, creating and reshaping others. In addition, social movements and resistances based on gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity and nationality are questioning claims to singularity in its various forms, including aspects of globalization.

Our lives, structured as they are according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior suggest that human activity is a performance; it is an activity undertaken with a consciousness of itself. Quite often we are conscious of projecting an identity – in places of worship, on the street, at political gatherings, among peers and so on. As followers of a religious group we identify our in-group members through mode of dress, language use and demeanour. On the street, the youth project their identity through walking style, haircut, clothing and so on while the ethnolinguistic identity may be manifested through language, food, residence, physical features among others.

Identity is produced through performance with an audience in mind or within view. When performed by individuals, identity is a deliberate communicative expression (or silencing) of behaviors which are relevant to norms conventionally associated with social identity. The performances serve as *confirmations* of the norms and *instruments* of practical experiences.

The chapters in this book do not see identity as a static communal attachment but rather as a dynamic and multifaceted process of belonging, at times manifested through institutional frameworks such as the law, media and education. It is a form of socially organizing and regulating cultural experience. In 'Culture, Gender Inequality and Women's Rights', Orchardson-Mazrui & Kimani Njogu argue that cultural practices can be used to empower women and reduce or eradicate inequalities based on gender. The writers urge us to research various cultures in order to understand their potential and efficacy. The chapter encourages an exploration of indigenous knowledge systems and the extraction of the best from cultural repertoires. Chapter Two on disability, Mbugua Wamungai explores the rhetorics of disability, history, race relations, popular music, politics and economics, religion and state institutions. In the final analysis, he shows that disability is unstable as a referential notion and that society constantly reinvents its images and reifies its meanings. This instability of identity is also discussed by Michael Wainaina, Nathan Ogechi and Charles Matathia with reference to youth identities. Whereas Wainaina's essay is on popular music and the opportunities for young people, Ogechi explores the phenomenon of *sheng* as an identity marker. Meanwhile Matathia examines what it means to be a young man in Kenya – politically, economically, culturally and socially.

One of the most important tools of identity is a national or regional language. Spoken in East, Central and parts of Southern Africa, Kiswahili has become an important marker of identity on the continent and beyond. In his chapter on 'Performing Identity' Richard Wafula looks at the fluid nature of Swahili identity and the multi-culturalism of Kiswahili literature. Significantly, the topic of Swahili identity has also been recently addressed by Alamin Mazrui in his book *Swahili Beyond Boundaries: Literature, Language and Identity* (2007) in a discussion on the aesthetics of Swahili poetry, with reference to a debate between conservatism and liberalism. Whereas conservatives are those who advocate the preservation of the "poetic status-quo" especially with regard to meter and rhyme, liberalists are those who advocate for experimentation with new poetic forms. Mazrui argues that literary form and literary aesthetics are implicated in the pursuit of identity and people tend to identify their literature not only in terms of its language and content, but also in terms of the uniqueness of its form and style. The Swahili accepted the emergence of the novel, the short story and the play on the East African coast without debate. These are genres and sub-genres that are a more recent product of the encounter with colonialism. In a sense, the genres were viewed as organic extensions of the pre-existing *ngano* (story) and dramatic performances of *mashairi ya kujibizana* (dialogue poetry), unlike free verse which was viewed as a subversion of an already existing canon. It would appear that the resistance, played out in prose and verse, was a manifestation of ethno-nationalist identity aimed at self-preservation in poetry. Whereas proponents of free verse sought 'to free themselves' from the "fetters" of received creativity, the supporters of conservatism argued that the "new" poets had supposedly turned to a "foreign" creative style because they were not adequately skilled to compose in the traditional style. Identity politics are played out and performed in the arena of Kiswahili poetic creativity.

An area in which identity is constantly performed is in the realm of religion. In her chapter, Mary Getui argues that religion in its various forms and manifestations plays a critical role in identity formation. Read together with the essay on circulation of media texts by Odhiambo Joseph, the chapter shows the changing nature of our identities – their fluidity and malleability. Odhiambo asserts the need for the creation of popular media texts in the post colonies so that they can contribute to the creation

of cultural and national identities within the context of globalization. This affirmation of creativity that engages with the local and the global is further demonstrated by Peter Wanderi with regard to sports and leisure, Bill Ruto in a discussion of Talai community who have been marginalized since the colonial days and Emily Achieng' Akuno in her chapter on music. In his chapter, Ruto provides useful insights on the efforts of the British to erase the Talai identity through the deportation of a whole community in the hope that they would be assimilated by the more dominant language group in their new 'home'. But the British had underestimated the power of circumcision as a marker of identity.

The articles in this publication raise important questions about the shaping of identity in Kenya and open new ways of understanding how culture, identity and performance are intertwined and expressed.

Kimani Njogu
February 2008.

CHAPTER ONE

Culture, Gender Inequality and Women's Rights in the Great Lakes¹

Kimani Njogu & Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui

Introduction

The Great Lakes region of Africa has numerous opportunities and challenges. It has huge mineral deposits, large forests, big rivers and a rich culture. However, it is also replete with numerous problems which include ethnic tensions and violence, military conflicts, high levels of poverty, political intolerance, economic uncertainty, urban and rural insecurity, disease and gender inequality. These problems are not insurmountable in view of the advances in science and technology as well as the availability of human and natural resources within the region. Whereas some of these difficulties could be traced to colonialism and uneven trade relations between Africa and the West, others could be attributed to the poor quality of leadership within the region as well as uncritical loyalty to ethno-linguistic cultures. It is important to recognize that there are cultural practices that inhibit or destroy human potential while others enhance it. Those that are inhibitive ought to be eradicated or transformed and those that are positive should be resurrected, celebrated and enhanced.

But what do we mean by culture? Culture may be viewed as the total sum of a people's way of life and includes norms and values of a society: their religion, politics, economics, technology, food habits, medicine, rules of marriage, the performing arts, law and so on. For Geertz (1973:44-5) culture is "a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instruments (what computer engineers call "programs")—for governing of behaviour." According to him, this view of culture "begins with the assumption that human thought is basically both social and public - that its natural habitat is the house yard, the market place, and the town square." Geertz's interpretation has the requisite implications of power and control

mechanisms embedded in culture, which allow for the exploration of gender inequality and inequity.

In his discussion of culture, Edward Said (1994) identifies two meanings of culture. First, it refers to the many practices like the arts, communication, and representation, which have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political domains. These human expressions have an aesthetic dimension embedded in art and seek to cause pleasure and entertainment. Second, culture includes a community's reservoir of what defines them as a people, in most cases representing the best that has been known and thought. Through culture, we are able to see society in its strengths and weaknesses and to understand ourselves. Culture, viewed as such, becomes a dynamic space for engagement by various interests and forces. The danger with the uncritical reading of this notion of culture is that it may entail a valorization of one's culture and an assumption that it is not answerable to views from the rest of the world. Consequently, the dehumanizing aspects of culture could easily be lost in this blind endorsement of one's culture. Equally, viewed from the 'outside', a people's culture could be rebuked in totality, without due regard to its positive attributes. Thus, it is vital to recognize certain universal values, informed by advances in human thought and knowledge, and to respect the particularities of communities.

Culture is an important capability that people bring into development. It influences development through its various forms of expression; attitudes and behaviour related to work, reward and exchange; traditions of public discussion and participation; social support and association; cultural sites of heritage and memory; and influences on values and morals. In this chapter, we address the issue of gender inequalities by looking at ways in which the cultural repertoire in the Great Lakes region can contribute to women's empowerment.

Gender Inequalities

Gender is a social construct, which asserts that the expectations, capabilities and responsibilities of men and women are not always biologically determined (Synder and Tadesse, 1995:14). The gender roles assigned to men and women are significantly defined structurally and culturally in ways which create, reinforce, and perpetuate relationships of male

dominance and female subordination. Through the process of socialization within the family, in educational institutions and other social spheres, boys and girls are conditioned to behave in certain ways and to play different roles in society. They are encouraged to conform to established cultural norms by being rewarded or punished for their behaviour. At times, the places women occupy in society are essentialized through claims of innate predispositions. This conditioning and stereotyping could easily have the effect of questioning the capability of girls and women to perform certain tasks. Repeated regularly in the process of socialization, it may solidify and become difficult to uproot from the mental frames of people.

But it is not just through socialization that inequalities are planted. Glaring gaps in policy, legal frameworks and limited economic opportunities make it difficult for women to perform to their full potential in social, economic and political spheres. For example, government policies and practices may view the Kenyan *jua kali* (informal sector) and subsistence farming, dominated by women, as not requiring as much support as the foreign-exchange earning and export-oriented economic activities predominately associated with men. The lack of support for the informal sector hence leads to poor performance and sustainability. But a closer look at sub-Saharan Africa shows that the survival of many countries depends heavily on activities associated with women in the *jua kali* sector. Furthermore, there are laws that deny women access to land ownership and opportunities to invest freely. Other laws, such as on succession and inheritance, labour, citizenship, marriage and property, discriminate against women (Murungi, 2002:62-3). These laws function as a handicap to women's economic capabilities and perpetuate a culture of dependence. Yet the economic independence of women is a major stage in bridging inequalities, preventing violence, and fostering self-esteem and well-being. Economically independent women are more likely to assert and demand their rights whenever they are violated. They are also likely to mentor girls and function as their role models.

In order to see the inequalities clearly one would need to scan various domains of life and to question them, vis-a-vis roles accorded to women. Gender inequality manifests itself in a number of spheres within the family, labour market, politico-judicial structures and in cultural-ideological productions, for example in the mass media. Values, norms, and practices enshrined in domains of social interaction may contribute to fostering

inequalities, reinforce gender related power differentials or increase violence against women. For instance, the cultural practice of son preference may contribute to denial of girls' access to education and curtail their opportunities in life. It may lead to early marriage and the onset of childbearing. In addition, perceptions political activities at national and local levels are principally the preserve of males may lead to disparities in political, economic, and social participation, decision-making, and leadership. In spite of these deprivations, it is important to recognize that gender equality and women's empowerment are an integral part of national development, peace building, and conflict-resolution. They are at the centre of humanizing the world. Whereas interventions to redress these inequalities could be political and economic, others may be cultural. Indeed, it has been claimed controversially that African cultures hinder the development of women (Subbo, 2002: 10). A closer look at the cultures of the Great Lakes region may show practices that have the potential of contributing in bridging the inequalities, as we shall show presently.

The Empowerment of Women

The empowerment of women has long been a goal of development work because of the recognition that the respect of women's rights and women's political participation, their education, socio-economic status, legal rights (for example, related to land inheritance), health and welfare are intricately linked to the survival of children and an improvement in the human condition. Equality is key to the formation of a democratic society, which aspires to social justice and human rights, achieved by addressing imbalances in families, communities, and nations. Thus, action is required in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres to ensure that women are not subjected to discrimination.

International meetings of the last decade such as the 1993 Conference on Human Rights, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, established that women's rights are human rights and that gender equality is key to national development, the institutionalization of democracy and good governance. Organizations, communities, and governments were required to integrate women's empowerment in their activities and to eliminate or modify practices that are discriminatory of women and that curtail their pursuit of rights and capabilities.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) stipulates the urgency of eliminating stereotypes, customs, and norms that give rise to the many legal, political, and economic constraints on women. Article I of CEDAW defines discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, human rights, and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” Discriminations contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. For instance, when women are not adequately represented in decision-making levels, their rights and freedoms may be violated. Notice that equality relates to the dignity, rights, opportunities and worth of men and women to participate in different spheres of life (Kameri-Mbote, 2002). Empowerment demands political participation, civil rights and reproductive rights for all women and a review of constitution, laws, policies that inhibit equality would be necessary. Equally, the enactment of women friendly statutes and policies would be a prerequisite for gender equality.

On the subject of the rights of women in Africa, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights states in Article 17 that “Women shall have the right to live in a positive cultural context and to participate at all levels in the determination of cultural policies.” This is in addition to Article 2 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, which “enshrines the principles of non-discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnic group, colour, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status.” Articles 60 and 61 of the above Charter also recognize the “regional and international human rights instruments and African practices consistent with international norms on human and peoples’ rights.” This is in harmony with the United Nations Charter (1945) which upholds the equal rights of men and women.

However, despite the declaration and recognition of these regional and international rights, women in Africa continue to face inequality and inequity in many spheres of their societies. Scholars and activists blame this situation on cultural practices and perceptions, as stated previously, which impact negatively on women. African women have withstood the

worst of cultural traditions, many of which have been described as oppressive, because they limit the advancement of women. According to Adhiambo Oduol, "...customary issues reflect socially constructed relationships of inequality, where the cultural differences between women and men represent the use of power by one group over the other, and where socializing people into these differences maintains the unequal power relationships." (2002: 39). Together with negative cultural practices, scholars have cited male dominance as a major obstacle to gender equality and equity.

Male Dominance

It is important to delineate the root causes of male dominance in order to understand gender inequality and inequity. This can only be done by understanding the cultural context in which the dominance manifests itself. Because cultures have their own organized systems, which determine how members of that particular culture behave towards each other and towards their environment, they have the potential of empowering or disempowering men and women. Mead (1963:284) argues that in all cultures, there is the same range of basic temperamental types established on the basis of heredity. These differences provide "the clues from which culture works, selecting one temperament, or a combination of related and congruent types, as desirable". In other words, there are certain universal tendencies, which are particularized by context and history. The particular traits solidify and become key to defining communities. Drawing on Mead's position, Sanday (1981:3) suggests that, "each culture must select a sex-role plan, that is, a template for the organization of sex-role expectations...sex-role plans form one kind of symbolic template. Such plans help men and women orient themselves as male and female to each other, to the world around them, and to the growing boys and girls whose behaviour they must shape to a commonly accepted mold". In essence the, "sex-role plans are part of the system of meanings by which a people explain their success, come to terms with fears, enshrine their past, and stamp themselves with a sense of 'people hood'(1981:63). The socio-cultural meanings shape behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. Women are key in transferring these interpretations of the world because of their role in bringing up families and teaching languages to their children.

Indeed, Mead (1968:19) is of the opinion that the more men are removed from the phenomenon of human birth, the more the male imagination contributes to the “cultural superstructure of belief and practice, regarding childbearing”. In many African societies, women rear children and teach them manners, respect, and social obligations. When empowered, women could contribute significantly in reshaping gender roles and expectations. They can subvert the stereotypes while fulfilling the social and cultural role of childrearing and upbringing. Thus, critical interventions targeted at mothers could contribute to women’s empowerment. Conversely, this places a burden on women since society expects child upbringing to be the role of women. When children go astray, women are blamed for not being good mothers to their children. Through some cultural engineering, society can socialize men to participate in child upbringing as a way of recognizing that they have as much duty as women to participate in this arena. This would also contribute to eliminating aspects of male dominance, which can be manifested itself in the family domain.

Friedl (1975) defines male dominance as “ a situation in which men have highly preferential access, although not always exclusive rights, to those activities to which the society accords the greatest values, and the exercise of which permits a measure of control over others.” It is significant that Friedl recognizes that men are favoured in terms of accessing certain economically and socially significant materials and rights, such as access to land and property. These institutions and positions in communities play a role in elevating men over women. Divale and Harris (1976:521-38) also highlight these asymmetrical relations. They define male dominance in terms of an “institutionalized complex” which consists of “asymmetrical frequencies of sex-linked practices and beliefs.” The practices and beliefs, in this case, would instil prestige and status to the male gender and devalue the contributions and capabilities of females.

The preferential allocation of rights may also be accompanied by attitudes and beliefs about gender roles. Indeed, Sanday (1981:164) looks at male dominance from two angles. First, is the “exclusion of women from political and economic decision-making” and second, “male aggression towards women”. Sanday measures this aggression using certain traits: First, expectation that males should be tough, brave, and aggressive; second, the presence of men’s house or specific places where only men may congregate; thirdly, raiding other groups for wives. Sanday

suggests that the presence of these traits in a society indicates a high degree of male aggression; while an absence of all traits indicates that male aggression is weakly developed (1984:164). Male dominance can be expressed in the cultural stereotype of 'machismo' or masculinity.

Interestingly, Sanday's research indicates that where females have economic control but no political power, 53% of women are prone to male aggression. Thus, economic empowerment and political participation are important for women's empowerment. According to Sanday, male aggression against women does not necessarily lead to female passivity. In some societies, it is expected that women will fight back, while in others, it is assumed that women will adopt the submissive role. However, even when women are submissive, they will use their own tools of resistance to show displeasure. Sanday posits that "male dominance is significantly associated with environmental and historical conditions" and that domination of women is a response to stress. Such stress may manifest itself in endemic warfare and chronic hunger (1981:171-2).

In the context of the Great Lakes Region, Sanday's research is useful in explaining possible reasons for these endemic conflicts. It is in this region that conflicts have arisen over limited resources such as water, pasture and the raiding of livestock between warring parties. Such displaced aggression manifests itself in conflicts and insecurity, which have led to the inevitable displacement or death of people and to the gross violation of women's rights. For instance, in Kenya, frequent conflicts between the pastoralists of North Eastern Province and Rift Valley to a certain extent a result of stress-related issues such as poor infrastructure, drought, famine, and lack of pasture.

The Role of Culture in the Empowerment of Women

It is important to question why it is that in contemporary African society, gender inequality (including violence against women, abuse of women's rights, etc.) continues to manifest itself despite many Protocols, Action Plans, and Strategies for fostering gender equality and equity. While this chapter recognizes that negative cultural practices, attitudes, and perceptions are largely to blame, it attempts to pinpoint aspects of traditional cultural practices, which can be described as positive and which could be used to dialogue and discourse on gender issues, vis-à-vis

negative aspects of culture, both traditional and contemporary. The chapter recognizes that African culture is a dynamic process and that in the contemporary situation it operates within the world of globalization and multiculturalism.

Recent research on positive aspects of traditional African culture is practically nonexistent. Whenever African culture is discussed, particularly in the context of gender inequality and women's rights, often the negative aspects are highlighted, because it is the negative aspects that deny women their rights and their full participation in all sectors of society. The constant focus on negative cultural practices may lead to ad hoc stigmatization of African cultures. This may hinder fruitful discussions and analyses which may signal hope and instead perpetuate despair and desperation. Narratives of cultural practices ought to provide hope even as they seek to discourage and eradicate dehumanizing tendencies.

In the context of women's empowerment, by 'positive' aspects of traditional culture, we mean all those aspects, which recognize the rights of women, however limited in scope, and which can serve as foundation stones for a better understanding and appreciation of women, the protection, and promotion of their rights, and their contribution to all sectors of society. It is important to take cognizance of the fact that all human societies have both positive and negative aspects of cultural practices, and that all societies need a solid cultural foundation, which recognizes the worth of all its citizens.

Since there is little published research on these positive aspects of African culture, early ethnographic and anthropological accounts, travelogues, monographs, and books are important sources for the extrapolation of positive aspects of African culture in politics, economics, technology, education, and so forth. These early sources provide an invaluable insight to many traditional cultural practices, which did not demean women, but rather gave them important spaces, however limited, to articulate and exercise their rights. Given the historical context in which women exercised these rights, it is important to look at how, in contemporary society, men and the society often manipulate and subvert these positive aspects to deny women their rights and full participation. As pointed out earlier, this is not an attempt to idealize the traditional cultural practices, but rather a way of delineating their usefulness and

importance in the debate of women's empowerment. This is also important for the survival of African cultures in their multifarious roles.

Matrilineal and Patrilineal Societies

In certain African cultures, women held prominent or dominant positions, especially in those societies that were matrilineal. It is often the case that in contemporary discussions, little mention is made of the fact that many African societies had women leaders and women decision-makers. This is an important foundation upon which to build on for the empowerment of women in the Great Lakes Region. Various scholars have noted that matrilineal societies were not based on subordination but rather on cooperation, harmonious coexistence, and development. Research shows that where matrilineality persisted, agriculture predominated; whereas animal husbandry predominated in patrilineal societies. Martin, Kay, and Voorhies (1975: 22-39) point out that descent and residence rules oriented to the maternal line are adaptive in favourable environments where conquest has not subjugated peoples. On the other hand, descent and residence rules oriented to the paternal line are adaptive where resources are scarce or where patrilineal invaders have subjugated populations. According to these authors, matrilineal structures are accommodating and integrative while patrilineal ones are acquisitive and internally divisive. Therefore, whereas patrilineal descent is associated with sexual inequality, matrilineal descent is associated with sexual equality. Sanday (1981:177), concurring with the above view, notes that in her research, 52% of the matrilineal societies, as compared to 19% of the patrilineal societies, are sexually equal. Further, 50% of the matrilineal societies, as compared to 20% of the strictly patrilineal ones, are sexually equal.

According to Loth (1987) among the Luba of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), matrilineal systems existed and women were exalted. The Lunda in traditional DRC had a bi-lineal system of succession that was both matrilineal and patrilineal. This system allowed women to enjoy their inheritance rights. Additionally, the Lunda people had a strong centrally controlled political hierarchy in which women played an important role.

Furthermore, among Ugandan communities of the Banyankole, the Baganda, the Banyoro, and the Toro, mothers, and sisters were recognized

as important people. In these groups, princesses and queen mothers made important decisions and held key posts. These matrilineal societies allowed such women to make decisions on the selection of new leaders and to perform certain leadership roles. Anti-monarchists and feminist scholars may argue that only royal women enjoyed this recognition; but again, in the context of history and the rights of women, it is an important factor to consider, especially as far as women leadership and decision-making is concerned. If traditional societies allowed women to be leaders and to make important decisions, why is it that contemporary society finds it difficult to recognize women as potential leaders and decision makers?

The significant reason why matrilinearity (matrilineality) continued to exert an influence on the position of women for a long time was the absolute predominance of the rural population (Loth 1987:32). Agriculture constitutes the economic basis for most people, either crop-growing or animal husbandry or both together, supplemented by hunting, gathering, and fishing. Despite the fact that subsistence agriculture is largely the domain of women who continue to contribute a large percent in food production, African societies hardly recognize women agriculturalists. In contemporary Kenya, for instance, women produce over 70% of the food (Orodho, 1998:119), yet few people appreciate this fact. The sustenance of most families is significantly dependent on women's labour on farms.

Elsewhere in Africa, there are several examples of traditional matrilineal societies where women ruled or had leadership roles in governance structures. Women were regents, co-regents, city founders, army commanders, officers and soldiers, and bodyguards. For example, in West Africa in the 15th century, Queen Amina ruled the Kingdom of Songhai in mid-Niger.

Oral traditions note that Queen Amina was a warrior who waged successful campaigns against neighbouring territories. She was able to extend her empire to the Atlantic coast. It is said that she founded cities, received tributes from important chiefs, and is reputed to have introduced the cola nut (Loth, 1987:35).

In addition, in the ancient Kingdom of Congo, there were female regents and rulers such as Donna Veronica and Donna Susanne. It may be argued that that these women leaders are likely to have suppressed

other women, especially those of a lower class; nonetheless, it is a fact that historically Africa has had renowned women leaders but unfortunately contemporary history hardly mentions them. On the other hand, history books are full of stories about men leaders and their heroic deeds. If socialization and education are to contribute to the elimination of negative images and perceptions of women, then it is important for history to highlight the important contribution of African women throughout history.

Other records show that elsewhere in West Africa, women enjoyed high status. For instance, in Senegal, when diplomatic negotiations were being carried out with foreigners, wives who held prominent positions (Demagnet, 1778) always surrounded the King. At times women led from the front, at other times they did so from behind. They would advise the rulers and guide their communities. In the Lunda kingdom of the Congo, the Queen, Lukokeshwa, had her own court, income, and she played a decisive role in the election of the King. Her husbands were classified officially as women and possessed no power whatsoever (Loth, 1987:57).

Several early writers mention the existence of female army commanders, or Amazons, in various parts of Africa. The name is said to mean "breastless" because one or both breasts were removed to enable the women to carry firearms easily. In Dahomey (Benin), regiments of Amazons guarded the royal palace in Abomey, the capital. A writer noted that these female soldiers were extremely impressive sight-well, armed, usually beautiful, strong, and healthy (Loth, 1987:64). Additionally, these women were renowned for their military skills. In Kenya, Mekatilili wa Menza waged a war against the British in 1913 and 1914 when the colonial government tried to coerce the people to participate in the war and in an effort to collect poll tax. The British colonial government denounced Mekatilili as a witch. When the British administrators were unable to coerce the people, they destroyed the sacred *kayas* (reservoirs of cultural beliefs, spiritual, medicinal knowledge). However, Mekatilili organized her people to resist, leading to her imprisonment. Later she was to escape from prison to rejoin her people. It is only recently that the contribution of women leaders such as Mekatilili is being recognized.

Clearly, there is a relationship between matrilineality and the empowerment of women. In African communities, men and women substantially occupy different positions, most of which are culturally

determined. In a number of cases, due to skewed relations of power, women occupy subordinate positions and this subordination is captured in African languages. In Botswana a woman was traditionally viewed as a *mosadi ke ngwana wa monna* meaning that a woman is the child of the man (Molokemme, 1990). Consequently, women had limited legal capacity, though in reality some women had more independence and rights than others did depending on social and marital status, individual drive and the broadmindedness of the men around them (Subbo, 2002:10). Similarly, elsewhere in Africa, women are often categorized as children. Certain words in African languages perpetuate certain stereotypes of women. Some scholars, such as Ogunwale (1995), argue that language in Africa has been used in a manner that degrades women. According to him, Yoruba words, for example, ascribe certain ideals to men. Women in Africa and in many other parts of the world have been demanding to be treated equally and to be judged based on their ability and intellect, and not on the cultural stereotypes that often shroud them. The continued invocation of culture and religion in order to treat women unequally is under constant well-grounded criticism.

Actions and Instruments in Women Empowerment

Within the contemporary political culture, governments have undertaken a number of actions in an effort to bridge the gap of gender inequality. Key among these is the attempt to mainstream gender issues in development efforts such as agriculture, water, environment, industry, health, education, politics and decision making positions in order to influence politics that affect women directly. Through awareness creation, lobbying and advocacy, the phenomenon of Affirmative Action, even when it is not sufficiently institutionalized, has started paying dividends. For example, in 1993 the Joint Admissions Board of the State universities in Kenya passed a policy to lower the cut off point by one mark for women applicants to the state universities. This measure has helped increase the number of female students attending public universities.

The principle of Affirmative Action was adopted in the constitutions of Uganda and Tanzania and the 1998 Constitution of Kenya Amendment Bill. Although Affirmative Action in the 1997 Inter-Parties Parliamentary Group (IPPG) recommendations led to an increase in women members of parliament in Kenya, the recommendations should be enacted in law in

order to have a sense of permanency. Women parliamentarians have taken to parliament key motions that will contribute to the empowerment of women, the most recent being the 2005 Sexual Offences Bill. The Affirmative Action Bill in Kenya seeks to increase the participation of women in parliament and in local authorities. Through the Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development, FIDA, FEMNET, Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW) and other organizations committed to women's empowerment, national policies are being realigned in order to protect the human rights of women and girls and to create opportunities for the realization of their full potential. The Children's Act 2001 which makes provision for parental responsibility, fostering, adoption, custody, guardianship, care and protection of children and which gives effect to the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is likely to enhance gender equality in Kenya because it has specific provisions protecting the girl child. But it needs to be implemented.

The Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) has since 1997 been advocating for gender equity in the national budget, an important prerequisite for equality. After implementing a project to increase gender awareness and enhancing the capabilities of women parliamentarians and their allies in parliament and civil society to analyse bills and policies from a gender perspective, FOWODE built skills in budget and financial analysis among politicians and activists (Byanyima 2001:5). FOWODE has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Parliamentary Budget office to work together on gender analyses of the budget and the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development has introduced a gender dimension in the budget making process. Because the budget is the main tool for executing the Poverty Eradication Action Plan, the involvement of organizations committed to gender equality in its formulation will contribute to the consolidation of gender friendly policies and cultures.

During the debate for a new constitution in Uganda, Action for Development (ACFODE), founded in 1985, agitated for inclusion of women's rights. At the continental level the transition from the Organization of Africa Union (OAU) to the African Union (AU) in July 2002 and the re-establishment of the East African Community (EAC) have paved the way for broader women's participation and political and

economic empowerment. Whereas the OAU was a gathering of political leaders of Africa, the AU is a union of Africa's peoples. For example, the Constitutive Council establishing the AU includes institutions for peoples participation such as the Pan African Parliament (PAP) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council. The Constitutive Act provides that the AU shall strive to promote gender equality, and protect human and peoples rights in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights and other relevant human rights instruments.

As a result of the advocacy work undertaken by Pan-African networks, the Durban AU Summit in 2002 recognized the contributions of African women and civil society organizations and affirmed that without the full involvement and participation of women the objectives of the AU could not be achieved (Wandia 2003:51). Gender mainstreaming at the AU will invariably yield positive results for similar action at the national levels. For example, Departments of Gender have been set up in a number of ministries in Kenya such as the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Gender and Social Services. In Tanzania, the Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA) as well as other lobby groups have ensured that gender inequalities are addressed at the national level and discriminative policies and laws repealed.

Equally, in Uganda a number of organizations such as (ACFODE) an NGO founded in 1985 FIDA, Uganda Gender Resource Centre, the Legal Aid Project of the Uganda Law Society, the Human Rights Foundation and the Ministry of Gender and Community Development, have continued pushing for promotion and protection of human rights. The Uganda Constitution of 1995 has been declared a 'women's constitution because it guarantees all the principles needed by women to facilitate their empowerment, development, dignity and rights' (Matembe 2002:228).

Although the new Constitutions in East Africa provide a space for gender equality and the culture of democracy, of greater significance is the process of constitution-making. The numerous workshops and seminars as well as public meetings have created opportunities for women to learn about their rights and the inadequacies of judicial processes and the law. These contemporary actions and instruments can be bolstered by positive cultural aspects as highlighted in the following sections of this chapter.

Sustainable Agriculture

The economic growth of Africa and the success of the development agenda will depend on the continent's ability to increase the capabilities and self-esteem of the majority of the people. Development is intricately related to various freedoms that people enjoy. This view requires that focus is made on social and economic arrangements and political and civil rights that make development possible. This approach sees people as the agents, the means and the end of development. If that is the case, development has to be construed, according to Claude Ake (1996:142), initially as rural development where over 70 percent of the people in Africa get their livelihood. By facilitating agricultural development, the Great Lakes region would contribute in alleviating gender inequalities. In other words, rural development should be well targeted and sustained in meeting the basic needs of all people.

Matrilineal societies appear to have had a sustainable agricultural base. According to Allen et al (1991:37), sustainable agriculture is one that equitably balances concerns of environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice among all sectors of society. As far as the empowerment of women is concerned, sustainable agriculture provides spaces of empowerment for women farmers. These spaces of work have the potential to be constructed as sites of resistance from which we can witness the creation of new gender identities (Trauger, 2004:290). One of the ubiquitous divisions of labour in this region is the collection of firewood. In many communities fire wood collecting is the domain of women (Osborn, 1990). In addition, among the Jie of Uganda, women who mainly worked communally dominated agriculture. The Jie say that sorghum is the cattle of women, giving an indication of the importance of this crop. Since most African societies do not allow women to own livestock, it is important that women own crops particularly since it is often the women who provide food security for the community. Despite the fact that in many subsistence economies women work on the farm and are intricately connected with land, they do not have ownership over land.

However, traditionally among the Kamba of Kenya, if a man had more than one wife, he was responsible for clearing bushes to create a farm plot for each wife. Each wife's plot was close to her own hut, away from the other co-wives. The woman's younger son would inherit this plot after

his mother's death. In a polygamous household, this system allowed women to own their own plots and to have complete rights over the crops they produced on these plots. The Gikuyu of Kenya had a similar tradition. Both groups usually allowed unmarried daughters a plot of their own on which they could build a house. It is significant that women could own limited rights to land ownership, at least in certain cultures such as the Ameru of Kenya.

In these polygamous communities, certain crops belonged exclusively to women, especially if they were subsistence crops, for example, sorghum, finger millet, *njugu*, *njahi*, sweet potatoes, and arrowroot. Crops like yams, sugarcane, and tobacco belong to men, as did *miraa* (khat). Goats and sheep could belong to both women and men, but cattle belonged exclusively to men. Poultry and poultry products belonged to women as did milk and ghee (Simiyu, 1986:30-37). Among the Bagesu of Uganda, each wife in a polygamous homestead had her own field and kept her own store of food (Roscoe, 1924:15). The right to ownership of crops and certain animals is indicative of a willingness by society to recognize the critical role played by women in food security since the plot was exclusively theirs as was the produce from it.

What is important to note, vis-à-vis contemporary polygamy, is that in traditional communities, polygamy was well regulated and allowed women in polygamous households to enjoy relative autonomy; whereas polygamous men in contemporary society conveniently invoke the practice, but do not adhere to laid down regulations. This means that in contemporary society, women often are denied their basic rights under customary marriage laws, and many lose their matrimonial homes and property on the death of their husbands; or their husbands may chase them away from their homes. This happens also in rural communities where the traditional practice continues, but women may not enjoy their rights under this custom. This again, has to do with men and extended family members who are unwilling to respect the rights of women, however limited these rights may be.

Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Laureate, notes in her Green Belt Movement Bulletin that the myth of male superiority can only be demolished, with shining examples of female achievement against which nobody could argue intelligently. The Green Belt Movement, and many

other rural projects initiated by women, are exemplary projects not dominated, as men so often claim, by the concerns of the kitchen, babies, nappies or sex. They are good examples of female achievements which should serve at least to encourage women to form a more positive image of themselves. These sentiments coming from a woman who has done a lot for the conservation of forests in Africa are a call for people to appreciate the contributions of women in national development and to see more clearly their leadership roles. However, women require financial support through interest-free loans, training on efficient methods of farming and assistance in marketing their goods. Legal provisions that make it easy for them to own land, invest, and sell their goods would contribute immensely in bridging the gender gap. If certain African cultures identified the role of women in agriculture, then this recognition could be replicated and strengthened.

Expression and Consequences of Sexuality

Due to the patriarchal nature of countries in Great Lakes Region, women have found themselves denied many opportunities. They have less access to education, skills development, economic empowerment and participation in decision-making. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985) reiterated the need for women to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential. The meeting affirmed that social and economic development should be encouraged to secure the participation of women as equal partners with men in the fields of work, equal access to all positions of employment, equal pay for work of equal value, and equal opportunities for education and vocational training.

Gender equality is still a challenge in the Great Lakes Region and statute books contain legal rules and principles, which are used to legitimize the subordination of women. Even where women's rights are catered for in the statutes, ignorance of such rights, lack of implementation, worsened by lack of education and levels of poverty, make it difficult for women to enjoy them. Moreover, cultural biases prevent women from reporting injustices and violations especially when they relate to sexuality. For instance, it is viewed as unnatural and disrespectful for a married woman to assert her rights against her husband. Hence, cases of spousal abuse and property confiscated are rarely reported (Omamo, 2002).

Economic dependence and fear of social stigmatization and rejection contribute in the non-reporting of such violations.

In an effort to understand why this state of affairs continues, it is important to look at specific areas of culture, which have the potential to contribute to the eradication of discriminatory attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs against women.

Circumcision is practised in many societies in the Great Lakes region, and often serves as a rite of passage to adulthood. Female circumcision has been shown to have devastating and negative health implications for women. What has not been shown is that male circumcision rites constantly reinforce the stereotypes of masculinity and the subordination of women. No research has been carried out to show how male circumcision can be a hindrance in the fight for gender equality and the promotion of women's rights because of the socialization of boys that occurs during these male rites.

The practice of female circumcision is universal in North Eastern Province of Kenya (99%) and least in Western Province (5%) (KDHS 2003). It is more prevalent among the uneducated. In Kenya, it is highest among the Somali, Kisii, and Maasai and lowest among Luhya and Luo. The Maasai and Kuria of Tanzania circumcise their girls. The practice of not circumcising girls, practised by certain communities in the region, can be used as a source for debate in other communities, which circumcise and this would be one way of ensuring that girls remain in school and are not married off while young. Likewise, successful uncircumcised women from circumcising communities could act as role models and mentors to girls. For instance, parliamentarian, Hon. Linah Jebii Kilimo of Kenya, is a strong advocate against female circumcision among her people, the Marakwet, and is not afraid to present herself as a successful, uncircumcised role model. She is both an MP and a former Cabinet Minister despite not having gone through circumcision.

In addition, in Kenya and Tanzanian, communities are starting to adopt alternative rites of passage for girls. In these rites, girls are secluded and 'circumcised without undergoing the physical cut. They undergo life-planning skills and are prepared for the future through counselling. The life planning skills relate to decision-making, adolescent development, gender roles and equality, relationships, teenage pregnancy, sexually

transmitted infections, and planning for the future (African Youth Alliance, 2002). The positive elements of the culture are retained while the negative ones are modified or eradicated. These alternative rites of passage give girls an opportunity to continue with education and protect them from the dangers of circumcision. The cultural practice of 'unyago' practiced among the Digo of Tanzania is being reformulated. In 'unyago' girls are taught by a 'kungwi' how to behave when they get married; how to take care of their bodies and how to relate to men. In the contemporary "unyago" they also learn how to assert their rights and to negotiate for them.

In the context of gender inequality, male attitudes and behaviour are at the centre of the AIDS problem, and Singhal and Rogers (2003) show that culture can indeed be an ally in combating AIDS. They provide an example in Mali in which the green *pendelu* campaign utilised the cultural strength represented by the husbands supportive role during pregnancy in order to promote maternal and child health. In addition, a number of socio-cultural and spiritual constraints in Senegalese society contributed in that country's efforts at combating AIDS. These include the cultural norms related to universality of marriage; the rapid remarriage of widows(ers) and divorcees; extended networks of family members who serve to control irresponsible sexual behaviour and the fear of dishonouring relatives due to inappropriate practices (Singhal & Rogers (2003:218).

The social prohibitions related to sexuality when nurtured and engaged may contribute to more harmonious co-existence between males and females as well as the empowerment of women. As the dominant partners during sexual intercourse and the principal initiators of sexual encounters, many demand '*ngozi kwa ngozi*' (skin to skin) encounters. They put pleasure and excitement in unprotected sex before respect and protection. Widespread stereotypical notions of 'masculinity' and what it means to be a 'real man' encourage disrespect and male dominance over women in matters of sexual encounters. A deliberate deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinity as a fluid and constantly changing notion may contribute in stemming the *tsunami* of HIV in the Great Lakes region. The tsunami cannot be tamed without the systematic and deliberate involvement of men. Cultural beliefs that showed men as protectors of communities might have to re-invoked, without of course the paternalism that goes with the belief. This can be done through media interventions by radio or folk culture. According to *The Pulse of Africa*, a 2004 BBC study,

most Africans get their information from the local media, especially radio at 85% of those interviewed. These avenues could be used to increase male participation and involvement in matters of women's health.

By the end of 2002, an estimated 58 million people had acquired HIV infection worldwide. Of these about 22 million had died (Helen Jackson 2002:9). In sub-Saharan Africa, 3.4 million new infections were reported in 2001, compared to 3.8 million in 2000 and 4.0 million in 1999. The situation remains serious and precarious. Also in Africa, 54% of adult infections by 2002 were women. Moreover, women are in general infected at a younger age than men are. And they die younger, because AIDS related deaths in women in sub-Saharan Africa peak in women in their 20s, whereas the deaths peak in men in their 30s and 40s. The early infection of women is partly attributed to cultural practices that deny women the right to make decisions related to their bodies.

The practices of *levirate* (inheritance of a wife by the deceased husband's brother which has devastated women in some communities, such as the Luo of Kenya,); polygamy; dry sex in which women are expected to use herbs, barks, powders, cotton wool and so on to dry the vagina; the suppression of sexual expression among women; female circumcision; and so on require re-evaluation so that the damaging elements in them are eradicated. In Zambia sexual cleansing for widows is being replaced with non-sexual rituals so that the overall ceremony continues and retains its value, and the same participants remain involved, but sex no longer takes place (Helen Jackson 2002:137).

Gender based violence caused by, among other things, economic inequalities, the acceptance of physical violence to resolve conflicts, low female autonomy and control of decision making in household and community matters and legal restrictions against property ownership and divorce women has been on the increase. Whenever women are in abusive relationships, they find it difficult to move out due to attitudes associated with divorce. However, that was not always the case. In Northern Namibia and South Angolan, women in the Ovambo communities used to be fairly independent. Matrimonial relations could be easily separated unilaterally by the woman, without negative consequences. This changed with the coming of Christianity which stigmatized divorce and made it difficult for women to seek divorce or separation.

In spite of hindrances based on sexuality, African women are still able to share their frustrations and pains through cultural spaces. For instance, in Durban, South Africa, women are often fearful of talking openly about their suffering, but through the Siyazana Project they are given resources to undertake activities and, in the process, to talk about their problems. One important activity is beadwork and basketry which allows women to talk about very personal problems without making eye contact (because they need to focus their attention as they work, the fact that they do not make eye contact is not taken negatively). The activity of beadwork and basketry produces safe haven and an important space for women to articulate their issues. Some communities in South Africa also make needlepoint 'memory cloths' as a means of reflecting upon violence in their lives (Allen Roberts, 2004 Personal communication). The cultural products and spaces are replicable. Many women are involved in beadwork, weaving, water fetching, firewood collection and other activities which are spaces which could be used to empower them. What is often not recognized is that certain cultural spaces allow women to express themselves and to ventilate their frustrations. These spaces also include the fields, the offices, the kitchens, and women's groups, for example. In a sense, therefore, women have alternative strategies of expressing their sexuality and resisting forces that seek to control them. These strategies can be identified, documented and re-energized for use in the contemporary world.

Sexual Reproductive Health

Areas in which women have always excelled in traditional African societies are in health, and especially reproductive health. Apart from being the protectors of cultural traditions, customs and beliefs, women were also the preservers of indigenous knowledge related to herbal medicine and spirituality. Women were involved in childbirth, gynaecological treatments, cosmetic treatments, and massage techniques for expectant women. Midwives and birth attendants knew the right diet for pre-natal and post-natal mothers. This vital role of women health practitioners is hardly recognized in contemporary society, yet this is a reservoir of knowledge, which can be documented and used as a foundation stone for bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary practices and the important contribution by women in these areas. Traditional communities,

which continue to exist in the Great Lakes region, acknowledged the important role that women played in this arena of life.

Excellent examples of the health knowledge that women possess can be found in the Great Lakes region. For example, traditional birth attendants among the Tugen of Kenya called *mererian*, *kikob lagoi*, or *chebos*, are respected in the society. *Nkaitoyoni* is a traditional birth attendant who gives advice to pregnant women on diet, work and exercise. *Ankalopani* is a specialist who deals with gynaecological problems. She monitors the position of the foetus, its movements, and general development. She prescribes medicines and delivers babies (1986, Baringo socio-cultural District profile, p.163). This was also the case among the Luhya and other communities in East Africa where old women knew methods for ensuring fertility. They knew the types of herbs to give to women in order to avoid pregnancy (1986 Bungoma socio-cultural profiles, p.59). In view of the distances to health centres and the fact that traditional birth attendants and herbalists live close to the people it makes sense for them to given additional knowledge and to be allowed to participate in health care delivery in order to deal with health challenges which face women, in particular rural women. A reconfiguration of the role of traditional birth attendants in the Great Lakes region could help reduce maternal mortality rates.

Taboos on Sex

Taboos on sex played a role in preventing pregnancy and acted as fertility regulators in many African cultures. In the context of the unprecedented rise in sexual crimes against women and girl-children, it is important to understand the important role that sex taboos played in traditional communities.

In many communities, heavy fines were imposed on husbands who did not control their sexual urges. In extreme cases, if a man continued to commit the act of impregnating women to the seventh child, he was fined and then castrated (1986, Meru District socio-cultural profiles, p.124). Whereas one would not condone the castration of males one does appreciate the moral of this prohibition. Men were being called upon to exercise self-control and to respect women's bodies. Society put the burden on men as a way of ensuring that women remained healthy after childbirth

and were involved in child rearing. Indeed, it was considered taboo for men among the Kalenjin of Baringo, Kenya, to have sex with their wives before six or more months after the birth of a child. The usual period of abstinence was a minimum of two to three years before a woman was expected to get pregnant again. If men contravened these prohibitions, they were physically attacked by the midwives and married women. During this prohibition period, the wife was not allowed to cook for her husband (1986, Baringo district socio-cultural profiles, p. 113). Other women or members of her family helped her with her household chores, such as firewood and water collection and so forth until she was strong enough to resume her duties. This communal help by women to each other shows the power of women collectivism.

In situations of famine, Pokot women did not conceive and older women knew which methods to use in order to help women not to do so. These methods were also used to avoid pre-marital pregnancies (1986, Baringo socio-cultural profiles, p.119). Thus in traditional societies, sexuality issues, which often plague the contemporary girl-child were, more or less, managed with without recourse to such practices as back-street abortions. Also, in Pokot society, an adulterous man was tied to a tree in which stinging ants reside. As the ants attacked him, he was beaten publicly by everyone. His lover had to be present. If the man committed adultery with a married woman he had to prepare a container of honey to give to the aggrieved husband. This public punishment acted as a powerful deterrent. Examples such as these can be used in dialogue and debate in an effort for communities to understand the root causes of violence against women in contemporary society; and to question why these 'positive' aspects of culture have been forgotten.

One of the most devastating consequences of conflict in the Great Lakes region is the rape of women and girls. It is important to understand how traditional societies dealt with issues of rape. This will help us get a glimpse of the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs linked to it.

In most communities, sexuality, sex, and marriage commanded respect and they were not to be generally abused by anyone. Among the Kamba of Kenya, if a man raped a woman, he was subjected to capital punishment. The Kamba believed that if a man raped somebody's daughter, all the spirits of the dead relatives wrecked havoc on the community. In Pokot

society, a rapist was required to send milk and goat meat for the girl to eat until she recovered from the ordeal. Thus sexual violence was not tolerated and was surrounded by numerous prohibitions and consequences sanctioned by communities. In these traditional communities, rape was considered a punishable crime.

In a number of African countries, the emphasis on sexual abstinence is also a challenge to notions of masculinity and self-control. The practice of *ukusoma* (a zulu term for non-penetrative sex) in order to preserve virginity and prevent pregnancy was common in the past. In this practice, the woman keeps her thighs closely together while the man finds sexual release (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Because the man did not want to risk isolation by the community, he controlled himself and did not demand penetration. Yet in contemporary society, African men frequently use the excuse that it is within African culture for men to exercise and enjoy their sexual rights, even if it is injurious to women. Sexual abstinence has been a major challenge in the fight against HIV and AIDs.

The practice of non-penetrative sex also existed elsewhere. Kenyatta (1978 [1938]) describes non-penetrative sex (*nguiko*) among the Gikuyu. *Nguiko* (fondling) followed a well-regulated code of behaviour.. According to Kenyatta (1978:159) the Gikuyu man had been taught to develop the technique of self-control in the matter of sex, which enabled him to sleep in the same bed with a girl without necessarily having sexual intercourse. He would not dare pull off a girl's garment because it was taboo (*thahu*) which could lead to a long process of purification and social stigmatization by the community and his age-mates (*riika*). In *nguiko*, the man squeezed his penis and fondled the girl until they were both satisfied, without penetrating. Custom also barred the girl from touching the man's sexual organ with her hands. Kenyatta goes on to say that ... "in the case of long-standing friendship a girl may allow a boy to put his sexual organ between her thighs and hold it tight in that position without penetrating" (1978:159). Full penetration, a rare occurrence, did not take place between casual lovers because of consequences stipulated by culture. For instance, a man who attempted to loosen a girls garment during *nguiko*, would be reported and ostracized by girls and boys alike for bringing shame to them.

The cultural stipulation against penetrative sex guarded against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. In view of the fact that women are most vulnerable to sexual infections in the Great Lakes

region of Africa due to unequal gender relations, poverty and gender violence, a reactivation of taboos and prohibitions related to sexual behaviour may pave the way for women empowerment by reducing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. More importantly, these taboos and prohibitions can be used in contemporary dialogue and discourse around these troubling issues. Empowering people to understand how these problems interfere with women's access to education, productivity, and good health is important.

In an effort to entrench gender equality in national affairs laws and policies are changing in order to ensure reproductive rights. The gender perspective is being used increasingly to guide sexual and reproductive health policies and programs, help advance equality and equity and ensure that women are central to health service delivery. The National Health Sector Strategic Plans in Kenya are now paying particular attention to the needs of women in the implementation of structural, financial and organizational reforms (see Kenya Ministry of Health Strategic Plan 1999-2004; Byanyima 2001).

Traditional Orature

In many African countries, orature has been used effectively for the transmission of information, passing on education and entertainment. Like all forms of art, orature has had two key functions: *utile* (education) and *dulce* (entertainment). But the power of orature resides in oracy: the skilful, confident and productive use of the spoken word (Zirimu & Bukenya, 1977). Thus, whereas orality refers to the state of oral communication, oracy is the ability to skilfully weave words towards a specific goal. In other words, productive oracy leads to power because it paves the way for self-assertion, skilful negotiation in relationships and conflicts and the ability to claim rights and freedoms.

Due to consolidation of patriarchy, colonialism, gender inequities, denial of opportunities and education, many women in the Great Lakes region are de-oracised and are not able to spin the spoken word for self empowerment and realization. The continued utilization of male voices to articulate truths about the world perpetuates the myth that the interpretation of the world can only be made by one sector of society. The reaffirmation of the proverb "The hen knows that dawn is here but watches

the mouth of the rooster”, contributes to the continued suppression of the female voice and the right to self-expression. It denies women the right to contribute significantly in their own destiny and that of the region. It is obvious even in contemporary society, when advertisements are made for consumer goods in which women are featured, a male voice inevitably endorses the product; thus, giving the impression that often men are in a better position to evaluate the worthiness of the product.

Yet oracy was a major attribute of women in many African countries. Story-telling was a women’s genre used to interweave experiences and share these with communities. The revival of story-telling and the tradition of oracy could contribute immensely in the empowerment of women. Within educational institutions, girls and boys should be given equal opportunities to answer oral questions. Educational and training programs in oracy could be initiated and specifically targeted at women. The programs would give women the skills needed to articulate their positions and interpretations of the world, without waiting for any prompts from males.

The realigning and subversion of educational structures could also be undertaken by re-appropriating oral communication to save gender relations and encourage more cross-gender dialogues. For example African women could appropriate the oral forms of communication themselves and use them to create and claim space for empowering oracy to assert their basic and survival needs. Through the art of story telling, women can craft a unique space for empowerment and harmonious coexistence of the genders. African women have for centuries accepted forms of oral performance to identify, examine, question, criticise and protest the norms and practices of their communities. Story-telling, a predominantly female art, can be skilfully used to point out the evils of gender based violence and other injustices.

In the process of questioning power relations, orature has many examples of stories crafted around big animal versus small animal, the neglected wife versus favoured wife, and the benefit of loving relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.

The deliberate and systematic utilization of the techniques of story-telling and the accompanying skill of oracy can contribute in the empowerment of women in the Great Lakes region of Africa. Equally, the

use of proverbs that encourage harmony and coexistence might be useful in peace building. For example, the proverb which says that one who does not travel may think that his/her mother is the best cook in the world and the roots of peace are bitter than neem but its fruits are sweeter than honey, are statements celebrating the value and virtue of peace and respect for others.

Consequencess of Conflict

The Great Lakes region is beleaguered by wars and conflicts. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women and children are under constant threat from the military and rebels and in Northern Uganda, they are kidnapped and raped. The situation has not been any different in Southern Sudan and Darfur. Demilitarization and security are extremely important if women and children are to survive and realize their full potential as human beings. In the context of war, family structures are being redefined. A major social consequence of war is an increase in the number of female-headed households. After the genocide in Rwanda 34% of the households were female headed, the majority of who were widows (World Bank, 1998).

In post-genocide Rwanda, women are taking new roles and responsibilities. Fifty seven percent (57%) of the adult working population aged 20 to 44 is female, and women produce 70% of the country's agricultural output (Hamilton, 2000). Within the social sphere women were the most affected as rape and genocide survivors, widows, heads of households, and caretakers of orphans and the sick.

As often happens in wars, women are targeted because of their gender and a major weapon of war is rape. Raped women face severe psycho-social trauma and health problems and are subjected to shame, ostracism, survival guilt, infertility, pregnancy, and diseases. In the politically motivated Kenyan ethnic clashes of the 1990s in the Rift Valley and Coast Provinces, women were targeted because of their gender. The wombs of expectant women were cut open and many died while others were left with life threatening disabilities. This is happening in a contemporary society in which many international charters and conventions exist aimed at protecting women and children.

In many African traditional cultures, women and children were rarely sexually abused nor killed during war because of the taboos associated

with harming them. Among the Maasai, Gikuyu and Ameru, for example, women and children were taken captive and integrated by the capturing community. According to Kenyatta ([1938] 1978) women were rarely killed because it was a disgrace for a warrior to kill a woman unless it was unavoidable. The prohibition against harming women during times of war has the potential to contribute in saving the lives of women. Currently, women are not spared by war as is so evident in Darfur, Northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and more recently in parts of Kenya. Neither were they spared in Rwanda and Burundi during the genocide.

It is vital that we investigate the reasons for the disconnect occurred between what was expected in traditional culture and what is happening in contemporary society, taking into account, of course, issues of globalization, poverty, unemployment, armed conflicts, abuse of human rights, and so forth. The investigation could help us come up with remedial measures which may be political, economic, social or legislative.

Peace Building using Game Theory

As implied thus far, women are denied their right to education, labour, health and social security. They are subjected to gender-based violence – the violence that affects women because they are women or affects them disproportionately. They are subjected to forced evictions, physical harm and many deprivations of liberty. The only way to address this massive denial of women's rights is by finding ways of articulating these issues in a conducive and enabling atmosphere.

Through activities such as music, drama, media, folk performances and sports, a culture of peace could be entrenched. In a brief statement on peace and children, Ann Musomba, the National Peace Education Advisor at the UNHCR, states:

“Most people marvel at how easily children make friends. It is amazing that this is mostly done through play. Two children, who have never met before and may be even of different races, can be engrossed in a cooperative game thirty minutes later.” (Peacemaker Issue No.6 Jan/March 2003:3)

The power of play as a social and cultural event for creating solidarity, harmony, cooperation and peace, is inspirational. Indeed, game theory

has been used to enrich educational curricula and to understand political events. In observing children and youth sports, many opportunities for the creation of peace become evident. The inter-cultural and inter-ethnic mix as the youth play may contribute in the eradication of stereotypes, biases and discrimination. Games could also emphasize fairness and cooperative-competitiveness, which can then be transferred into other domains of life. Moreover, a gender mix could portray the capabilities of women and girls and debunk stereotypes.

Singhal & Rogers (2003:235) remind us that all cultures value games and sports. Cricket, football, and athletics invoke huge and varied emotions among fans, as do other games and sports. They bring people together and momentarily suspend differences of age, gender, religion, nationality, and ethnicity. For example, in a health related soccer campaign put together by a range of partners, soccer players from Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda, and Eritrea were trained in HIV prevention so that they could counsel youth in community sports camps and high schools. The youth would then learn soccer, as well as life skills. They learned about dribbling, tackling and scoring and soccer analogies such as developing a 'game plan', 'using one's head', 'knowing your opponent', 'playing safe', 'passing when in danger', 'wearing socks', etc., were used to prepare the youth (Singhal & Rogers 2003:237). Similar cultural spaces could be utilized to prepare the youth for life challenges. Already, this has been happening with drama which has helped to address health related issues.

Peace Initiatives

Because of the wars and conflicts in the Great Lakes region, a number of meetings have been organized by women in Africa in the pursuit of peace in their communities, resulting in a certain action points. For instance, the Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace, held in 1993 and sanctioned by Heads of States of the OAU in 1995, in Uganda, was an effort at looking for peace. It covered the following areas: the nature and effects of conflict and underdevelopment, women in the struggle for peace, the empowerment of women in the peace process and a culture of tolerance and violence.

Similarly, the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995 affirmed the human rights of women in the context of sexual and reproductive health. In all cases, the inalienable link between peace, development and gender equality were reiterated. Women are key in creating and sustaining a supportive social fabric in communities; a skill cultivated in the process of bringing up children and giving care to the sick. Their inclusion in peace-building processes is therefore, vital.

In traditional African societies, women were often called upon to resolve conflicts. Maasai women, *Noongotonye ilmurani*, (mothers of the warriors or youths), intervened during conflicts by running away from their homes in order for men to persuade them to return home. The women would refuse to return unless the warriors promised to keep peace. The women would also go into the battlefield and walk between the warring parties. They walked among the chiefs and other leaders. Maasai women also removed their lower skirts (*olokesena*) or their belts to show the warring parties that they valued life and peace. Also in some communities in Kenya, women may protest against any form of injustice by removing their clothes until they stand naked in the sight of men. Kenyan women did this in Uhuru Park in 1992 to protest the continued injustices and dictatorship of the KANU regime during the clamour for multi-party politics in Kenya and the release of pro-democracy politicians and activists. Their action had dramatic effect and achieved the desired results. Stripping naked in front of men is the traditional epitome of total outrage by Kenyan women, and acceptance, however reluctant, by men that things have gone far enough. The fact that women have the power to alter the events of history clearly demonstrates by this fact.

During and after armed conflicts women have been able to come together and recapture their constructive role in society and to create new networks. They have the ability to form organizations, which safeguard their interests. Collective assistance by women to women in the performance of farming tasks such as in *ngwatio* or *gitati* among the Gikuyu; *Mwethya*, among the Kamba; *Nthngurumi*, among the Meru; *Konyruok* among the Luo; *Harambee* among the Waswahili; and *Esangara* among the Luhya again demonstrates the strength of women to come together and assist each other. In all these tasks, women take turns when working for

the benefit of each member of the 'union'. This task sharing was an aspect of communal work and points to the ability of communities to solve problems together. In contemporary society in the Great Lakes region, such as in Kenya, this traditional collectivism is now expressed in the 'merry-go-round' concept in which women get together in groups and contribute money towards their economic empowerment. This urge for sharing can be harnessed and utilized for the creation of peace and harmony in families and communities.

Communal work was a strong tradition which enabled women and men to take care of their community as well as to improve their status. The communal sharing created solidarity, unity of purpose, collective efficacy and a sense of social support among members of the community. For example, during the Mau Mau war (1952-1960) women were able to manage their families even after their men were detained or killed. Women helped each other during the conflict years. Equally, in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo women have been working together to assuage the pains of the genocide and wars.

Rosalind Boyd (2001) in a study of organizations working for peace and reconciliation in the Great Lakes region of Africa found out that women's organizations are important in achieving women's empowerment. She says:

Although there was an active civil society in the region before the eruption of conflict, in the transition to peace, women's organizations have since multiplied and come to the fore. These organizations provide a forum for women to address the trauma they experienced through psychological counselling, medical assistance, and the support of the victims. Not only do they offer a network of support; these organizations also provide micro-credit initiatives, legal assistance, education programmes and various forms of concrete support. In each country of the region, whose histories and experiences are distinct, they are making a lasting contribution to women's health and well-being, and the well-being of their strategies as a whole (2001:4).

These organizations represent efforts by women in the region to become involved in the process of peace building. Moreover, they give women the opportunity they desperately need to become economically independent, participate in political work, and entrench gender issues into the development agenda. As mentioned above, collective organizing,

rotating contributions, and loan schemes referred to as Merry-Go-Round are important for empowerment. They have their roots in collectivistic cultures.

Peace could also be enhanced through the use of symbols. Many cultures in the Great Lakes Region of Africa have symbols of power, authority, and peace. Considering the importance of peace for women, images that enhance dialogue could be quite useful. These symbols could be reactivated and enhanced. In Kenya, Sultan Somjee used material culture objects and symbols in conflict resolution after the infamous ethnic clashes in Kenya (2004, Personal Communication). Somjee was able to bring together warring communities to dialogue using traditional symbols of peace. His conflict resolution workshops were successful and he was able to set up a couple of regional peace museums in Kenya where these material cultural objects are displayed. Another example of the use of material cultural symbols is among the Kuku people of Northern Uganda who use the *Kuye* stick as a sign of peace. A *kuye* is a light stick found by the river banks. Whenever a community conflict arose, elders would pick up the *kuye* as a gesture of peace and the need for dialogue. Community members would then sit in a circle, as a sign of togetherness and unity. The elders would allow the stick to go round the circle with each member getting an opportunity to speak while holding the *kuye*. That was how consensus was built through consultation and conscious conversation conducted openly and with integrity.

Contemporary Culture

Apart from the above cited aspects of culture, which can be used in the empowerment of women, contemporary culture such as music, print and electronic media, technology, and education, are very important. Education, In particular, is the key to the eradication of negative attitudes, beliefs, and practices, which hinder the advancement of women and their rights. Technology and creativity could also be used in the empowerment of women. If one looks at the tremendous range of material culture produced by African women, it is possible to see the breadth of knowledge and skills that women possess and which are hardly ever appreciated. It is often said that African women and girls are poor at the sciences, yet traditionally African women for centuries have had the technological skills

to brew and distil alcohol; spin dye, and weave mats, baskets, fabric; prepare, form, and fire clay products; develop the pestle and mortar and grinding stones for the production of flour; do sophisticated cookery and food preservation, and so forth.

Whereas craft activities practised by men are frequently highlighted and used in the informal industrial sector for men's economic empowerment, women's craft activities are often relegated to the background, though in some communities, such as among the Kamba of Kenya, basketry has helped many rural women to earn a living.

Elsewhere in the world, it was traditional crafts like textiles and pottery that acted as springboards for the industrial revolution. The precision and sense of detail and creativity can be easily transferred to the technological world. African women are a rich cultural reservoir of geometry, calculation, and skills acquired at an early age through the practice of crafts. These need to be harnessed and highlighted and promoted in the pursuit of industrialization in the Great Lakes region.

Conclusion

Most discussions of African cultures have paid scant attention to their positive and redeemable aspects. In this chapter, we sought to show that culture could indeed be an ally to women's empowerment. There are positive attributes to the culture as well as spaces that could be re-inhabited in order to deal more deliberately with topical issues – disease, political participation, economic well being, peace, and other emergent issues. These positive aspects of culture in the Great Lakes region which have been forgotten, suppressed, or ignored, require more work and engagement. It is worth reconfiguring the negative aspects of culture, deconstructing, and reconstructing them so that they can be more enhancing of humanity. For example, the alternative rites of passage that are slowly gaining presence in the Great Lakes region of Africa constitute an aspect of cultural engineering worth serious study in terms of efficacy and sustainability. Whatever the case, working through communities instead of against them is quite rewarding and this is much more so whenever cultural engineering is undertaken. In addition traditional communication channels could be reactivated fruitfully in enhancing self-expression and aural comprehension. Orature is rich in visual imagery,

and is the basis on which learning is founded. Oral narratives, proverbs, sayings and riddles have tremendous potential for telling truth about inequality in gender relations and healthy living. With ancient wisdom, allegory, metaphor, and symbolic representation of events, contemporary situations could be questioned and subverted.

Furthermore, national constitutions, laws, and policies that ensure gender equality must be enacted, promoted and implemented. Equally, it is necessary to adopt temporary special measures that would accelerate equality between the genders; such as Affirmative Action. The modification of social and cultural patterns in order to achieve the elimination of prejudices and practices against women ought to be undertaken. Deliberate efforts should be made to ensure equality in political and public life, education, employment and labour, access to health, finance, and social security, as well as legal and civil spheres. The development of rural areas and the broadening of freedoms enjoyed by communities are key to women's empowerment.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this article was first commissioned and published by UNESCO, Paris. We are grateful to UNESCO for permission to republish.

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CHAPTER TWO

Disability Rhetorics and Identity in Kenya

Mbugua wa-Mungai

Introduction

"You'll have to contend with me you dog! I will kill you, you dog!" - Male Nairobi City Council officer to a disabled female hawkker. (Tom Mboya Street, April 2004)

We treat the disabled in this country real badly. These guys don't stand much of a chance in the current scheme of things. I even wonder whether the present discourse on their human rights is tenable because in the first place our cultures do not even recognize that the disabled are human at all. In my view, we're beginning from the wrong end of things in this matter. *Wainaina, May 2007*

The second quote above is taken from an informant's response. I had asked, in the course of casual conversation, what his views on disability in popular culture were. His response became the basis upon which I began to think about a number of what later became critical research questions. Does disability matter? If it does, to *whom* does it matter and *why*? At what level does Kenyan society respond to disability and in what manner? Through what processes does the verbal and physical violence against persons with disabilities that the first quote evinces become 'normal' so as not to raise any protests? These questions will form the spine around which the broad question of disability as an identity will be interrogated. Culture is treated as being, simultaneously, the basis upon which perceptions about disability are forged at the same time as it acts as the very expression of these attitudes. From literature to newspapers, from ordinary conversations to TV, one finds society perpetually putting in place the rhetorical bits within which to cast the discursive around the question of disability. A critical assumption upon which I formulate the argument here is that perpetual constructions of disability in diverse forms (symbolic or concrete, verbal or non-verbal) constitute for society a necessary mode of self-understanding; culture simultaneously humanizes and de-humanizes. Overall, my contention is that 'disability' is a rhetorical strategy which is

essentially one about the power of the non-disabled, not dis-eased (aberrant) bodies; it is an overtly political term. Disabling—whether actual, as in the case of limb amputations and facial mutilations in the Sierra Leonean and Ugandan civil wars, or symbolic—enables control. My data will be drawn from popular discourse in newspapers, folklore, literature, history as well as political practices. In this manner, I hope to demonstrate ways in which language as a cultural agent disables. Before turning to how disability works as a rhetorical strategy in culture, I will briefly dwell on some definitional aspects that I find critical to an understanding of both disability and processes of social disabling.

Defining the indefinable

Perhaps a good starting point for a discussion of ‘disability’ ought to be at the level of semantics; first because language is a constitutive agent that both structures and en-voices thought and, secondly, since language creates, somewhat unintentionally, a safe distance from which to interrogate a rather nervous topic. It is an anxious matter to the subjects who have to live with the tag (*practitioners*) as well as the rest of society (*theorists*) who alternatively gaze at and wonder what it must mean to live with and under such a label. In this regard, it is illustrative that lexicography (i.e. dictionaries) has been instrumental in obfuscating the way we go about understanding and responding to the term disability. Consider for instance the following definition of the term in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2002):

Disability 1. a physical or mental condition that limits a persons’ movements, senses, or activities 2. a disadvantage or handicap, especially one imposed or recognized by law

It is immediately noticeable that this definition imposes a narrow, purely physiological understanding of the subject but one which, in spite of its limitations, has been predominantly/universally adopted. It is not difficult to gauge why this is so, given society’s over-reliance on dictionaries as critical instruments of shaping discourse. Yet, it should be clear by now that physiological limitations are daily being surmounted through medical advances; the use of prosthetic limbs, artificial voice boxes, hearing aids, corrective surgery etc. Differently put, it is now possible to turn disability around, to literally refashion the disabled body.

Compare the *COED* definition to the following definition of disability taken from the popular web-based unconventional encyclopedia *Wikipedia*:

- a) A significantly restricted capability, relative to an individual or group norm, to perform some or all of the tasks of daily life i.e. physical functioning (sight, mobility, hearing, mental ailment) in relation to environmental factors.
- b) A product of social and cultural attitude¹

The social aspect in this definition matters here precisely because disability is a social-political practice more than it is a description of subjects in relation to their environment(s) as we see in the first definition. Yet a critical question that begs to be answered is whether the *COED* lexicographers were totally unaware of disability as a non-medical phenomenon. In this regard, we must not lose sight of the fact that as linguistic experts (and therefore products of the academy), dictionary writers are part of the knowledge economy. Thus, if they fail to recognize a particular word's peculiar meaning(s), such failure might not be sufficiently explained away as disinterest. The fact that the *Wikipedia* definition in (b) above has been done by "non-specialists," despite its making better sense of the term disability, seems to be a viable indication that 'experts' might sometimes train their focus so narrowly as to forget that the lexical items they dissect often relate to lived experience. This paper attempts to interrogate some of the ways through which society names and defines disabilities in its quotidian experience; social disability is perhaps the more debilitating to individuals' survival. Such an effort might also help to point out some of the difficulties of defining disability.

The last King of Scotland: Diseased bodies in (historical) perspective

No matter the angle from which we choose to interrogate disability, the historical one can never be ignored. History and culture are intertwined, whether through direct memorials or through subtler forms such as narratives. It is in this context that we might understand the narratives told of Idi Amin, self-proclaimed "King of Scotland". Whatever the historical worth there is in these stories, they also afford us useful glimpses into the cultural world of his time and, by extension, of other places in Africa. In Kenya, Idi Amin is a legend not just because he is rumoured to

have been a cannibal but, more often, for the narratives about having his soldiers load ‘cripples’ onto lorries and then tipping them into Lake Victoria. Incidentally, the movie *The Last King of Scotland* does not examine this claim in any way. The disabled and the beggars, for Idi Amin, constituted a specific material threat to society’s survival. It might be easy to explain away this behaviour as being merely a reaction to “*the socially ugly*”² but my contention is that such attitudes, whatever their manifestations, are constructed and framed within a logic that is deliberately aimed at further incapacitating individuals beyond the physical conditions that are referred to by the term ‘disabled’. In Amin’s case, we find anxieties related to social prosperity; getting rid of supposedly dependent members ensures a steady ‘able-bodied’ work-force. It is the same logic that saw, for instance, a couple in Tana River District, Kenya cut up their disabled son, cook his body parts and serve them as a meal for the family.³ However, we also need to consider the possibility that the existence of so many poor and disabled persons in 1970s Uganda was an indictment of Amin’s regime; poor economic policies—the forcible Africanisation of Indian businesses, for instance—that saw a general economic decline and the failure of the health services to arrest the vagaries of polio. I contend that for Idi Amin the physical erasure from society of the disabled as a specific category of a broader social group was a conscious attempt at confronting his own failures.

Indeed, other people in traditional Africa also used to carry out forms of deletion upon persons that were deemed to represent a form of disability. Amongst the Agikuyu for instance, twins were dumped in the bushes at birth as they were considered to be a bad omen; raising them would have spelt disaster (Leakey, 1977). The Igbo too discarded their infant twins largely for the same reasons (see Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, 1958) and also marked off specific clans as *Osu*, socially undesirable and hence outcasts. Thus Clara, in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960), with all her ideas of social progress, becomes socially disabled on account of the *Osu* tag that frames her identity and which nearly everyone, apart from Obi, her lover, is happy to invoke.

Elsewhere, physical disability is emblematic of emasculation as we see in Meja Mwangi’s *Carcass for Hounds* (1974). A Colonial Chief, Kahuru Wamae, infamous for his ruthless suppression of the Mau Mau, is impotent; he cannot sire “*even a one-legged child.*” Cast in these terms, his authority

as a ruler is called to question—he is also infamous for his cowardice—and he understands disability to be central to his own self-figuration. His antagonist, General Haraka's final fall is even more dramatically mapped by reference to disability.

Kimamo relaxed his grip and stared into the pool of tears [... He] watched Maguru Nyaga grow into a man, a chief, and a general, Haraka. Then he suddenly saw Haraka *with*er into a *wounded, helpless cripple*. The crippled general lay *dying*. (1974: 126. My emphasis)

It is illustrative that '*Maguru Nyaga*' literally translates to 'ostrich legs'—swift and powerful—thereby heightening the tensions inherent in General Haraka's reversal of fortunes as he now lies immobile, a pathetic figure that is only capable of self pity and, consequently, tears. Here being crippled is the ultimate loss, a wasting away that is considered worse than either Kahuru Wamae's impotence or even death itself.

At another level, racial and other overly-marked manifestations of alterity have often been used to mark whole groups as socially disabled and thereby justify acts of brutality, whether psychological or physical, against them. The use of African dwarves in European circuses, their detention in zoos to be gazed at and later the preservation of their remains in museums as specimens for perverted study, was instrumental in preparing a background against which to legitimize the colonization of Africans. How else can one convincingly read the tragic story of the slave Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman, a Khoi Khoi woman derogatorily referred to as 'Hottentot Venus', who was taken from South Africa to London displays and later French circuses in 1810 for Europeans to gaze at her large rear?⁴ The widespread cultural acts alluded to here construct Africans as animals, objects of entertainment and wonder; the African jungle, being full of monstrous creatures, needed to be tamed. Thus having disabled a whole race, it becomes possible and legitimate for imperial forces to wilfully violate Africa at several levels (from slave trade and slavery to colonialism) with minimal, if any, genuine objections from Europe. There are parallel portraits of this phenomenon of disabling in literature, as we see for instance in the work of Nadine Gordimer. Under apartheid rule, Africans are deliberately othered, and thus rendered disabled, contingent to a colour gradation in a society where whiteness is the only key to productive social survival (see Wa-Mungai, 1998). In a different but relevant context, Alice

Walker's *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) depicts an isolated community in Greece where the main tourist attraction is a female dwarf who has been locked away at the back of a tiny church. In an ironic sense, the community's well-being depends on sheltering the female dwarf. She, in turn, attracts an income for the village; disability can be a fortune. Indeed, the Kenyan press often features stories of 'faked' disability where individuals seek to cash in on public sympathy for material gain by way of alms.⁵

At any rate, invisible disabilities such as intellectual ones challenge the thinking that physical markers always enable clear-cut ways of identifying disability. Deaf persons in Kenya for instance are treated, as they should, like 'normal' people only until their hearing in capacity is discovered. The resulting ostracisation is so severe that they constitute a separate community of their own, an insularisation that results in the use of terms like "*deaf world*" and phrases like "*lost among the hearing*" (Bragg, 2001). This forces upon such people certain involuntary 'choices'—this might be understood as a secondary social disability—and this might be one way of explaining the tendency for deaf persons to intermarry just as there is a perceptible trend amongst the physically disabled to marry from within their circles. As a physically disabled informant stated, "*I married a woman who is like me because only that kind of a woman can understand me in my condition. Perhaps if I married one who isn't disabled she would spend all her time pitying me.*" As is evident from this statement, the speaker suffers from low self-esteem which might be attributable to the ghettoized nature of his life. Having attended a school that was then exclusively meant for the physically disabled, his realities were narrowly, but understandably, dichotomized in us–them terms. Such categorizations are not conducive to social survival (wa-Mungai, 2007: 174 and Karanja, 1997). Proof of this is to be found in the fact that deaf people in Kenya have only recently began to learn of the existence of HIV-Aids. This is firstly because it was assumed that they could not engage in sexual acts and secondly, literature on the disease has hardly been translated into sign language.⁶

Perhaps disabling as a strategy is most visibly at work in situations where political claims are openly made. In this regard, the case of the Roma powerfully illustrates how modes of socio-economic and political disenfranchisement continually work to disable whole nations.⁷ Europe has been keen to disown the Roma and there is a not-so-hidden attempt

by the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (2003) to de-humanize them by using lower case 'g' for the prevalent derogatory noun 'gypsies', by which they have been historically referred to. Amongst Europe's last identifiable ethnic groups, the Roma are known by their history of wandering and, even more widely, by stereotypes about their dishonesty and thieving habits. They are alleged to be averse to school and to bathing.⁸ Be that as it may, one must ask to what extent it has been the objective interest of Europeans to keep the Roma mobile, rootless and thereby 'stateless'. Any Western European state that admits them as its citizens with full and equal rights must be prepared to bear the full financial and cultural costs of having such people within its borders. Thus, while they might not be hounded out of the particular states where they might reside, the Roma suffer perpetual discrimination. In history, Nazi Germany and its allies exterminated many of them in concentration camps alongside Jews. At another level, the desire by Europe to be rid of the Roma might be understood as an attempt at distancing culture from nature and the perceived Roma lack of progress thus becomes socially disabling.

Political and economic forms of disabling are evident in other places. While acknowledging that each case has its specific politics, the state of affairs amongst the Inuit of Canada for instance, is not entirely dissimilar to that of the Roma. At the core of their dispute with Anglo-French Canada is the question of self-determination/political rights. Basically, their argument is that they want the state to invest more and better resources in Inuit welfare. Further, they demand the right to establish close ties with other Inuit who inhabit the northern pole, a demand that would obviously have political and economic consequences since it stems out of the perception—real or imagined—that they have been excluded from mainstream Canadian society. Their argument is that such seclusion is related to cultural difference.⁹ Like the Roma, they consider the name Eskimo to be demeaning and non-referential to their identity. In different but related contexts, one can see how an ethnic identity has been used as a social-political disabling strategy in the cases of indigenous American Indians in the US, the Aborigines and the Maori in Australia and New Zealand respectively, and the Jews during the Third Reich. As history has shown in both Rwanda and Burundi, to be Tutsi or Hutu can mean survival or death depending on the ethnicity of those in power.

Religion also constitutes a key plank around which notions of disability and its identities are constructed. The Dalit caste under Hinduism instantiates a profound link between religion and permanent social incapacitation. To be born into the untouchable caste is to enter life with a sealed fate. This enables us to see the twinning of religious ethos to cultural practices in order to not only deny rights and privileges to one group but also to simultaneously confer the same to other groups who depend on Dalit labour for their upkeep. Indeed, in early 2007 the Indian government's efforts to extend the right to higher education to low caste Hindu were met with violent street protests. In the Bible, the seclusion of the sick (especially lepers and 'the lame') pointedly illustrates the idea of disability as contaminating. Hence, even the practice of keeping disabled persons at Capernaum, apparently to await the healing turbulence of the lake's waters, seems to deny the fact that this was a colony of the sick. Such exclusion is not alien to Jewish culture at the time as there was already a practice of casting out the sick to live outside city walls.

As Foucault (*The Birth of the Clinic*, 1973) has shown, state institutions such as prisons and hospitals have been useful strategies of surveillance upon the socially disagreeable, be it in terms of disease or generally being aberrant bodies. Similarly, we may note the role of American psychiatric institutions in identifying and 'neutralizing' persons who were perceived to constitute a 'threat' to the American nation. Having failed to completely relocate the blacks to Africa, of which the foundation of Liberia in 1847 was a first step, racial extremists within the white political establishment sought other means of disabling the African-American population resulting in the forcible sterilizations of African-Americans under the pseudoscientific eugenics project. While this cannot be said to be the origin of the ever-present suspicion of whites by blacks, it nevertheless solidified feelings of racial mistrust on the latter's part. Evidence of this is amply located in their "*conspiracy theory*" folklore (Turner, 1994; Fine and Turner, 2001). Similarly, the forced womb removals performed upon Jewish women under the Nazi T4 programme served a comparable purpose.¹⁰ Here race, taken as the predicate of a national identity, clearly becomes a political hindrance that is both socially and personally disabling. At times however, disabling can be a useful psychological strategy of dealing with power. A satirical representation of such a situation is seen in Ferdinand Oyono's novel *Houseboy* (1956: 33) whereby Tounde, the servant, loses his awe of

colonial white Frenchmen when he discovers that all of them, including the police commandant who is his employer, are uncircumcised. Power becomes emasculated. Thus the houseboy dethrones French imperial power from its pedestal and literally places it in disdainful disregard (“*this discovery [...] killed something inside me....I knew I should never be frightened of the commandant again [...] Now I stood unconcerned under his gaze.*”) and thereby marks himself, the victim of its power, as the superior force. Disabling the general here is a subversive reconstruction of his identity and thus the symbolic emasculation of the uncircumcised rulers by the colonized who, in this case, figure themselves as ‘real’ men. Having placed a broad canvas against which disability might be examined, we might now turn to suggest a rationale for its existence as a rhetorical phenomenon.

Why disability?

Given the prevalence of anti-disabled sentiments in Kenya, it must be asked why society finds it necessary to construct disability on the same unchanging terms. My contention is that disability rhetoric is aimed at enabling self-understanding for the non-disabled. Disability does not exist as objective fact; rather its constant (re)formulation may be explained as being society’s desire for constant reassurance about its own (‘perfect’) health. In a sense, this discourse can be seen within Douglas’ (1966) analysis of society’s treatment of taboo subjects in *Purity and Danger*. If a particular topic is deemed to constitute and arouse considerable anxiety, society tends not to talk about it. Such anxieties might be related to power and control. This is evident where patriarchy seeks to regulate the behaviour of women during their menstrual cycles and thereby impose the linguistic terms with which society inscribes the menses as a ‘shameful’ act. In this manner, women in traditional communities lose power/control over their sexuality. Similarly, when the rest of society constantly reifies the negative attributes ascribed to whatever form of disability, it robs the persons so described of the ability to re-inscribe disability differently. This is especially so given an asymmetrical access often literal, to the media and other public spaces on the part of persons with disabilities. Kenyan politicians, for instance, monopolize these and crowd out nearly everyone else, a phenomenon that is attributable to a false understanding of leadership and a critique of which is the object of Njogu’s *Governance and Development* (2007). Under these conditions, persons with disabilities can only be named, and thus be

controlled since self-naming becomes a privilege of the rest of society. The power/control schemes involved in such situations are evident in the unnecessarily long and treacherous path that disability advocacy has taken in Kenya, culminating in the enactment into law of the *Persons With Disability Act of 2003*. In itself, this is laudable but for a number of curious facts. First, the process of crafting the law took an unconscionably long time, from 1990 to 2003. Secondly, the final law is a poor reflection of the draft that was proposed by the task force set up in 1990 to put the legislation together. This is seen in the fact that few implementation mechanisms were put into the 2003 disability law. Government agencies such as the Income Tax Department cite this point in their constant refusal to fulfil their obligations under this law.¹¹ Third, the Disability Council that was established to 'oversee' the implementation is under-funded and powerless to enforce compliance with the law. As such, there is a noticeable apathy and lack of goodwill on the part of the government/politicians in seeing the disability law work. There is also an economic angle to this reluctance to enforce disability rights—it is considered an investment with no tangible returns within the context of competing priorities.

It might also be argued that part of the reason for lack of sensitivity to the needs of persons with disabilities has to do with the de-humanization of such individuals. In his psychoanalytical study of competitions as instances of domination and control, Dundes (1997) has demonstrated how through folklore human beings employ inverted projection to negatively construct ideas and identities about their opponents. This is done as a way of justifying whatever demeaning treatment that might be subsequently meted out in the process of conquest. It is safer and easier to deal with a subject about whom one has negative ideas as opposed to dealing with one about whom there are no such ideas. The de-humanization that is referred to in the informant quote at the beginning of this paper fits well within this strategic mode. In this manner, explaining official indifference to or negligence of the welfare of persons with disabilities becomes unnecessary. It is instructive that in the past when disabled hawkers have protested against harassment by Nairobi City Council officers, they have been beaten up and their walking aids confiscated.¹² Five years later, neither an official explanation of the gross abuse nor an apology has ever been issued by the city authorities. Some time in April 2004 I witnessed a burly male city council officer drag by the

arm a physically disabled female hawker along the muddy pavement outside the Kenya Commercial Bank branch on Tom Mboya Street, scattering her wares in the process as he menacingly repeated, "*Utaniona mbwa hii! Nitakuua wewe mbwa!* (you'll have to contend with me you dog! I will kill you, you dog!) Shocking as this man's behaviour was, what was even more stunning was that not a single bystander attempted to intervene. Such things, one of them said, "*happen between men and women, maybe she is his woman*" and one cannot just intervene in a fight whose cause is unknown. Thus having rendered the abuse in terms of a quarrel over sex, with the woman having been declared responsible for her own violation, the bystanders legitimized it and began walking away indifferently. It is a safe assumption that the public holds greater levels of apathy to and contempt for disabled persons than they might be willing to admit.

Disability as a rhetorical strategy

Looking at the way the term 'disabled' is used it is clear that in nearly all instances it is deployed as a rhetorical trope. For instance, after arguing strenuously that disability is by definition a deviation from a normative standard, Nyamu (2007)¹³ likens being gay to being disabled. Here, the physical condition, as a social indicator, is deemed to have negative valence. And because disability remains for most people an inscrutable enigma, it becomes possible to choose and cite one form of disability over another depending on which of these forms is deemed to be the more powerful trope within a particular rhetorical set up. By extension, disability becomes a metaphor for moral corruption when the writer argues that to be gay is to be depraved. Yet for all its superficial understanding of disability—putting sexual proclivities on the same plane with disability establishes a false equivalence since disability is not about choice—Nyamu's thinking enables us to think about the ways in which language, specifically metaphors of disability, are often marshalled to speak to power relations. In a sense, the gay problem in Kenya is about the power of the dominant orthodox mainstream culture (whether Christian, Muslim or traditional) to dictate a code of sexuality, in this case heterosexuality, for citizens. Thus, it is in the interest of the mainstream to deny gay people the power to state their claims; disabling them becomes an exercise in social control.

The above point is more pointedly evident in Kenyan media where the phrase 'to be blind' is used with callous alacrity when politicians berate

opponents for *“being blind to the development”* that the incumbents of political office have supposedly helped to achieve. As a public domain, politics is fertile with tropes of disability. Blindness has a long history as a politically-loaded term in Kenya. Indeed, in 2002, former president Daniel Moi stated in public in reference to the late Oki-Ooko Ombaka, who had recently lost his sight and was then deputizing the Chair of the Constitutional Review Commission, that a blind person cannot lead others. In fact, it is neither curious nor surprising that such language is used at all given the general prevalence of negative attitudes about persons with disabilities. What is curious is the fact that even when such language is employed, there are hardly any protests; there were few expressions of support for Ombaka in regard to Moi’s slur above. At another level, and given the impact that the media normally has upon the general public, the wide circulation in the media of disability metaphors serves to normalize their usage.

Incidentally, Kenyans generally consider visual impairment as being more of a disability than physical disability. This might explain why in December 2002 as Mwai Kibaki was being sworn in as president on a wheelchair, his right foot in a cast, nobody expressed disquiet at a disabled man being installed in power. The subtle irony here lies in the unuttered awareness of the possibility that everyone can of an instant become disabled—Richard Leakey, former Secretary to the Cabinet, Sammy Leshore, Member of Parliament for Samburu East, and Arthur Kemoli, musician and scholar, became disabled during their tenure in public office. As we see in Kibaki’s case, disability is sometimes benignly ignored contingent to temporary imperatives. However, this is not to say that the role of the disabled in public life has been widely recognized or accepted. Often factors as mundane as barriers in the physical environment deny them participation in public activities. At any rate, the few ‘success’ stories¹⁴ of persons with disabilities remain largely unheard thereby giving rise to the assumption that to be disabled is necessarily to be a failure. Disability success stories become thus describable not necessarily because the individuals in question have achieved stellar accomplishments—albeit this might happen—but because they have had to overcome tremendous odds that society wittingly or otherwise places in their paths. More often, however, and this might in part be seen as reinforcing the negative perception alluded to here, the media is replete with stories about charity

institutions for the disabled, PWD¹⁵ chained to trees and so on, where helplessness becomes a predominating theme. Even if such phenomenon exists, one must still ask whether that is the only angle from which such narratives are framed.

Popular music is yet another field in which the rhetoric of disability is powerfully evident. Again, like Kenyan politicians, popular musicians occupy a central position in Kenyan public discourse. Sometimes even politicians have felt threatened by musicians as is demonstrated by Joseph Kamaru's case. His music was banned by Daniel Moi's government in the early 1990s on account of its perceived heavy anti-establishment content (Haugerud, 1997: 28–30). Popular music's power to galvanize citizens into action was clearly evident with the opposition's use of '*Unbwogable*' during the 2002 general election (Nyairo and Ogude, 2005). One might argue that popular music as cultural practice is so pervasive within the flows of everyday Kenyan life that it has evolved into a crucial medium not only for the transmission of metaphors but also, and perhaps even more critically, for the construction of their principal meanings. Thus, it is common to find in popular music various types of disability identified and narrated about to indicate their debilitating effects on relationships and the broader society.¹⁶ Blindness, being crippled and leprosy amongst other forms of disability become objects of contempt. And because popular singers do not interrogate the cultural assumptions on disability that have been built into the folklore around which their music is constructed, ultimately they do not enable either understanding or critical discourse on the subject. In fact, popular music, because of its relationship to folklore, tends to reinforce prejudices about disability. We see this for instance in Mwalimu James Mbugua's song '*Tulia kwangu*' in which the persona invokes the Kiswahili proverb "*umaskini si kilema*" (poverty is not disability) to convince his lover that one day he will strike it rich and thereby overcome his disability. One of John De Mathew's song "*Mburi ya Rwanio*", marks persons with disabilities as unworthy opponents for 'real men'. Even the song '*Ciku kiwete*'¹⁷ which ostensibly celebrates the marriage of a 'crippled' woman, Ciku, to a non-disabled man succeeds more in drawing listeners' attention to the legitimacy of the anti-disabled prejudices of the men who accompany the bridegroom to the wedding than by forcing a re-evaluation of these biases. Incidentally, the bridegroom's male friends who are named in this particular track—Kigia, Kamaaru and Musaimo—are all popular

singers who command wide fan bases amongst Gikuyu listeners. It is illustrative that none of them has done a song, be it positive or negative, on disability.

Conclusion: Disability as need-fulfilment

I set out to show that disability as a term does not in actual fact bear any intrinsic meanings because these are constructed within diverse and shifting socio-cultural backgrounds. I have demonstrated that as a referential term disability is unstable and that it can be inscribed with whatever valences—based on other general practices—that speakers might find useful at particular moments. Aware of this aspect of the term as a malleable linguistic device that can be removed from meaningful placement within its material conditions, disability becomes but a loose rhetorical device.

In this way society continuously (re) invents images of disability and reifies their meanings within particular everyday transactions. Folklore and the mass media are two significant avenues that reinforce each other's tropes. Thus understood, perhaps the silence around questions of disability, and the lack of critical debate regarding the same, can be seen as being rooted not so much in shame but, more realistically, in the unspoken knowledge of the perverted uses to which disability as a rhetorical strategy is often deployed. This absolves society from undertaking any serious action. Ultimately, disability is essentially twinned to the understanding and practice of power. Hence for instance, when the enforcement of disability rights does not happen as it should, persons with disability are consigned by design to grey, invisible spaces. And thus being hidden from view, the rest of society is content that its disabled members cannot call attention to either unequal opportunities or the skewed distribution of resources. As my informant cited at the beginning of this chapter stated, Kenyan persons with disabilities have been perpetually getting a raw deal; this happens in part because their disability is a nearly-meaningless way of identifying them since it can and does mean so broadly as to often mean nothing. Making it impossible to name the 'other' in precise terms makes it easier and possible to think about them in non-human terms.

Notes

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/disability>

² See 'Dancing on fragile limbs', *Sunday Standard, Society*, September 23, 2007, pp. 4-5.

³ 'Couple kill and eat own child', *Sunday Nation*, July 24, 2005, p. 75.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saartjie_Baartman.

⁵ See for instance 'Fake beggar arrested in Embu', *Kenya Times* October 12, 2007, p. 4.

⁶ See 'Aids campaigns have failed to address plight of the disabled', *Daily Nation*, December 22, 2005, p. 10.

⁷ A fuller overview of the Roma story can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roma_people accessed on October 16 2007.

⁸ These Gypsy stereotypes have travelled far wide and in the western world, with literature lending an active hand as is seen in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Crafted into literature, they become tools for the normalization of anti-Roma sentiments.

⁹ These observations were made by members of a Christian Inuit group that I met at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel in February 2004. Informants requested anonymity.

¹⁰ Brenda Brueggemann is involved in on-going work in this area, some of which was presented at a disability, culture and human rights workshop in Nairobi in June 2007.

¹¹ In e-mail communication between the tax authorities and myself, the Commissioner of Income tax stated that the Kenya Revenue Authority had declined to issue any orders for tax exemptions in line with the PWD Act 2003. The UNDP has since engaged a team of experts to put together implementation articles and to review what is a well-meaning but practically unenforceable law.

¹² See photo and story 'Lives and limbs lost during raids by cruel askaris', *Daily Nation, Outlook/Inside Story*, September 19, 2005, p. 8.

¹³ The writer is a respected retired civil servant who is also formerly a member of the Electoral Commission of Kenya. His conservative views on gays can be considered as being not only representative of his generation but also of Kenyans generally as was witnessed during the World Social Forum held in March 2007, during which gays were condemned as perverts.

¹⁴ There are numerous such stories, but which are rarely told, in academia, athletics, the bar, civil society and the Civil Service.

¹⁵ Persons with disability.

¹⁶ I have examined this question more specifically and comprehensively in a forthcoming paper ' "For I name thee...": Disability Onomastics in Kenyan Folklore and Popular Music' that was presented at the Disability, Culture and Human Rights International Workshop held in Nairobi 14th-16th June 2007

¹⁷ Pirate tape; singer unknown.

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CHAPTER THREE

‘Lemme do m’ thing’: Objective Possibilities for Social Meaning and Re-visioning Youth Identity through Pop-Music

Michael Wainaina

Introduction

The growth of Kenyan hip-hop within the popular music scene in Kenya has been one of the most significant cultural development of the recent times. A particular form of hip-hop known as *genge*, characterized by danceable rhythm, pumping beats and raunchy lyrics has dominated the pop-music scene and become very popular with the youth. We shall use the term hip-hop and *genge* interchangeably. This paper explores the opportunities and liberties that this genre has availed the youth in expressing and re-visioning identities, especially as seen from traditionally-defined adult-controlled structures and institutions, chief among these being the school. In searching for objective possibilities, this paper seeks to explore how the youth negotiate and reconcile the tensions and voices that characterize the content and context of this genre, subsequently drawing conclusions on the extent of the impact of the genre on the youths’ sense of being and becoming.

The influence of popular music is pervasive, the genre being a widely disseminated and commercially mediated form. The appeal of the genre to a mass of young people, and the counter concern that it is ‘corrupting culture’ has heightened the tensions between the two dominant sets or perspectives of art *viz* ‘serious art’ and ‘pop art’. According to Willis 2001: 2

Culture as serious art is used to mean the best of those activities separated from everyday life which are meant to express absolute values about the nature of human existence *in a medium which is disciplined, self conscious and often difficult to master...* Art is away from life judged for itself, autonomous in its functions and values, and ultimately based on detached logo-centric meaning [emphasis mine].

This is a view that would be at variance with the rising influence of hip-hop culture, which is mass produced, transient and sensational. The growth of mass youth cultural forms of expression, specifically hip-hop, necessitates a re-visioning of this view of art and culture. This paper further surmises that pop music offers a critique on this view of culture and art, providing us with an opportunity to explore objective possibilities in locating how the youth eschew, negotiate or altogether subvert dominant perspectives of high-art as defined by adult, elite social institutions and structures. They do this in an effort to define an identity independent of the confines and expectations of these structures and institutions and their 'high culture', 'serious art' dictates.

Genesis of tensions

Ever since the genesis of Kenyan hip-hop in the early 1990s, a tension has existed as this form, which is popular with the youth, is seen as being at variance with the dominant adult values and prescriptions for youth in the contemporary society. The socially defined progression of youth is best represented in an old song that is etched deeply into the minds of Kenyans who are well past middle age. The song would be played over and over on the then Voice of Kenya (VOK)¹ radio, the only broadcaster before the liberalization of the air waves in the 1990s. It would accompany some of the broadcasts to schools. The lyrics of the ballad are as follows:

Someni, vijana,
muongeze pia bidii,
mwisho wa kusoma,
mtapata kazi nzuri sana

*(Study young people
And put in more effort
After studying
You will get very good jobs)*

The song prescribed the route expected of all young people. The need for schooling was emphasized with the promise that as long as one worked hard in school, he/she would get a very good job and like in the fairytales, 'live happily ever after.' The rise of hip-hop—since it attracted young performers and a following from young people expected to be pouring their energies into schooling—upset that expected order of things. In some ways, the debate continues on the viability of the performance arts over

formal schooling and whether young people should invest time trying to 'make it' in the now crowded music industry at the expense of school and the goodies it promises. These tensions began to be manifest within this art in its early years. It is best exemplified by Nazizi's hit single, *Sawa tu* (It's Fine).

Sawa Tu by Nazizi Hirji
Kila siku naenda shule kama nime late
Naamka,
Haijafika hata morning na niko tired
Nakimbia shule, niko late
Mwalimu ananiambia
nipige press-ups kaa mia tano hapo kwa gate
[...]
(Speaker to her mother) *Mama mama nataka kuwa rapper*
(Mother to Speaker) *Mtoto wacha kuwa mjinga*
(Speaker to mother) *Nataka kuwa famous kaa Kalamashaka*
(Mother to Speaker) *Na je ukishindwa*
[...]
(Mother to Speaker) *Mtoto we umenishinda!*
(Speaker to mother) *Nataka kuwakilisha hip hop culture*

Everyday I get to school late,
I get up
I am tired and it's hardly morning
I run to school and I am already late
The teacher tells me
To do five hundred press-ups at the gate
Mum, mum, I want to be a rapper
Child, stop being stupid
I want to be famous like Kalamashaka
And if you fail?
Child, you are out of control
I want to represent hip-hop culture
[...]

In this song, the speaker who is a young girl, and possibly a self-portrait of Nazizi herself, argues with her mother when she (mother) tells her to go to school. She claims that she does not fit in school but more importantly, she is not interested in school because she wants to be famous like Kalamashaka. Kalamashaka is a music group that achieved hip-hop fame in the mid-1990s. They burst onto the scene with their debut hit single

Tafsiri Hii that came with mass appeal and received favourable airtime on radio stations nationwide. The group comprising three members—Oteraw, Kama and Johnny—crucially paved the way for hip-hop to become mainstream in Kenya (Kalamashaka, 2007). The speaker in Nazizi's song reflects the possibilities that young people saw in hip-hop with the success of the group, and thus the plea "*Nataka Kuwa famous kaa Kalamashaka.*"² Unfortunately, the mother does not share the youth's enthusiasm for the possibilities offered by hip-hop and tells her daughter "*not to be stupid*". The only sure road to fame or success is school. However, the youth is bored with school and considers it an insensitive institution that merely stands in her way to fame. The tensions expressed in the exchange between the mother and the young speaker give us a glimpse into the divergent view of the role of the school in providing the arena that satisfies young people's sense of becoming, in the face of new possibilities offered by *genge*.

From your thing to m' thing!

The continued growth and popularity of *genge* has not silenced the critics. It has grown to a genre that offers the youth possibilities for re-visioning self-expression and identity formation, despite encumbrances of the mainstream adult culture. More recently, Czars'³ 2005 hit, *Amka Ukatike* has used the *genge* genre to make an impressive critique on the role of the school and its circumscribed and restrictive structures, as well as its pretensions to high culture and art. In this song, the artist explores wider possibilities for breaking away from these restrictive structures allowing the youth to move from the structured and imposed adult world of high culture to an expressive self-defined youth 'thing'. In so doing, the success of this song lies with the very clever use of both verbal and visual artistic resources.

The song is set in a Schools' Drama Festival where the speaker is supposed to be presenting a *shairi*, a form of classical poetry in Swahili. The Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival, held under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, is an annual event that occurs between the months of February and April (Ministry of Education, 2000). Participation in the festival is open to all primary and secondary schools, colleges, polytechnics, technology and technical training institutes, universities and other post-secondary school institutions. The festival covers zonal, district, provincial and national levels (Mumma, 1995; Blackburn *et al.*, 1986). The

quality of performance determines which ones will qualify from one level to the next, eventually getting to the national festival. At every stage there are adjudicators who are drawn from the teaching and drama fraternity in the country who judge the quality of performances. This panel of judges decides what performances move from one stage to the next, and ultimately, the winners at national level. The decisions of the adjudicators' panel are final. Students do not participate in the judging process. The process is controlled by rules issued by the Ministry of Education and the operations are controlled by teachers who form organizing committees at all stages. Although it is supposed to be an event to showcase the best of youth creativity, its rules and structures result in this creativity being strictly controlled by the adult institutionalized structures and creative ethos. In self-expressive terms, therefore, the festival is the schools' 'thing', a controlled way in which the system seeks to provide an avenue for young people to creatively express themselves.

In the set of the video of *Amka Ukatike*, as the presenter performs the *shairi*, students are in attendance as spectators and there is a bench of adjudicators to judge the recital. This is typical of the drama festival. The teacher in charge of the presentation stands watch at the back of the hall with a script to guide the student as he recites. The speaker starts with a traditional introduction that would be expected in the drama festivals:

Honorable Adjudicators
Teachers and my fellow students
My name is Mohammed Abdul Karim
And I am about to recite a poem to you entitled,
'Mgeni' (Visitor)

The recital from Mohamed Abdul Karim follows:

Mgeni kumpokea
Kumbe ni kujijongea
Alipokuja siku ya kwanza
Alipokewa vizuri
Alipokuja siku ya pili
Hakupokewa vizuri
Mgeni kumpokea
Kumbe ni kujijongea

Welcoming a visitor
is getting yourself into trouble

When he came the first day
he was well received
When he came the second day
he wasn't welcome
Welcoming a visitor
Is getting yourself into trouble

The audience comprising students falls asleep as the speaker recites the poem. It is obvious that both the speaker and the audience are bored stiff by the recital. Indeed after the first stanza the speaker can longer continue with the recital and declares:

*Aish manze sii-feel manze
Hii kitu haibambi
Lemme do m'thing*

*Aish-mates, I can't 'feel' this poem,
It is neither interesting nor entertaining
Let me do my thing.*

The speaker changes the poem and introduces *genge* beats. He divests the persona of the school boy Mohammed Abdul Karim, and assumes the persona of the artist Czars and starts on the *genge* song *Amka Ukatike* (Stand Up and Dance) as the audience bursts back to life. As opposed to the classical Swahili *shairi*, the hip-hop song is delivered in Sheng, a language that is a mixture of Swahili and English, and is predominantly used by the youth. The adjudicators and the directing teacher are totally flabbergasted by the change of text and form.

The rest of the song is a racy rendition where the new persona goads a girl to stand up and dance:

Czars!!!
Bam bam bam
Genge, Genge, Genge!!

*Cheki ule manzi anavyo come
anavyo cheza drum
anavyo kata bam bam bam bam
mi napenda ukidance
coz you have a chance
basi amka ukatike,
amka ukatike (x 4)*

*Cheki ule manzi anavyo kata tonight
Shaking her figure to left and to right,
Mamanzi wote nataka mufurahi,
Nataka mudance ki experience,
Girl you look so romantic tonight
On that outfit ime kutight
Joo, tule raha basi baby
Shake your body kama beyonce
songa karibu nikuonyeshe
hicho kiuno nikukamate
chini kwa chini nikusakate
mbona mpaka che
au vipi babe?*

*Cheki ule manzi anavyo come
anavyo cheza drum
anavyo kata bam bam bam bam
mi napenda ukidance
coz you have a chance
basi amka ukatike,
amka ukatike (x 4)*

*Ebu just take a look the way she is moving
happy girl sexy girl the way she dancing
Czars I niko excited ina ni frenzy,
me wanna be there,
ukikata we kata eeee
You look so sexy
mi nataka kutouch touch
Naku shake shake
unanimake my mind go far
so we gonna party on till dawn
Baby girl with wine and go down
Coz you know ume ni turn me on
The way you're looking hot in a the dance floor*

*Look at that girl coming,
the way she's playing the drum
the way she's dancing bam bam bam
I like the way you're dancing
so stand up and dance
so stand up and dance*

Look at that girl dancing tonight,
 I want all the girls to be happy
 I want you to dance like you have experience
 In that tight outfit
 Let's then have fun baby
 Shake your body like Beyonce
 Come close I show you
 so that I can hold your waist
 We go down and down
 Till dawn
 Isn't it baby?

Look at that girl coming,
 the way she's playing the drum
 the way she's dancing bam bam bam
 I like the way you're dancing
 So stand up and dance

Just look at the way she's moving,
 Czars I am excited into a frenzy,
 I want to be there,
 As you dance
 I want to touch touch you,
 And to rock you,
 You make my mind go far,
 Because you know you've turned me on
 The way you're looking hot in a the dance floor

(As he continues singing and the audience joins in the dance, he walks over to the adjudicators' table; He pulls out the young female teacher from her seat, over the table and she joins him on the stage to dance with him).

Cheki ule manzi anavyo come
anavyo cheza drum
anavyo kata bam bam bam bam
mi napenda ukidance
coz you have a chance
basi amka ukatike
amka ukatike (x 4)

Look at that girl coming,
 the way she's playing the drum
 the way she's dancing bam bam bam
 I like the way you're dancing,

So stand up and dance
So stand up and dance

(As the song continues, the lead adjudicator cannot take it anymore. He stands up and bangs on the table in a fury. He shouts in heavily accented English and Kiswahili).

Stop this nonsense!
(Addressing the teacher dancing on stage)
Madam, we are here on a drama festival!
Si alikuwa anasema poem?
Unapeleka mtoto kwa stage?

(To all in the hall)

We are here on serious matters,
Finished! Stop the nonsense, finished!
Hii kazi iishe ama tuende kufanya home work,
(Banging the table) *finished!*

Wasn't he supposed to be reciting a poem?
You dare take the child onto the stage!
We had better get down to the proper business of the day or else this
performance will be disbanded and you will all go to do your homework

(The crowd boos the teacher into silence; the song and dance continues).

unanijazz unavyo kata, aaa bam bam bam bam
unavyo kata bila kuhata, aaa bam bam bam bam
ni nabaki naona tu raha raha tam tam
basi dada wacha kukaa,
amka ukatike

You excite me when you dance
The way you dance without missing a step
You leave me feeling happy
So sister, stop sitting,
Get up and let's dance

Changing form and style: Changing meanings

Significant changes characterise the piece *Amka Ukatike*, and these changes are accompanied by changing moods from all the participants involved. It is clear from the beginning that the artist situates this song within the problematic dichotomy of 'high art' as opposed to 'popular art' referred

to earlier. We have singled out the change of name and genre for elaboration.

What's in a name?

When the video starts, a student by the name of Mohammed Abdul Karim is reciting a *shairi* within the context of the drama festival. This happens to be the artist himself who, incidentally, was still a school pupil at the time of shooting this video. The change in form and style of the performance demands that the artist change his persona and thus his name. He becomes Czars and starts on the new style, *genge*. The change in name is significant in situating the young artist within a different genre. While hip-hop artists all over the world have stage names, the change becomes noteworthy in *genge* when we take into consideration the significance of names and naming in the African system. Naming in many African communities has certain identity markers, in addition to the more generally accepted identity markers common in names in many non-African cultures, for example gender. A change in name would undermine these identity markers. In the case of the artist Mohammed Abdul Karim, there are two important identity markers that are obvious from his name, *viz.*, religion and ethnicity. While the former may not hold much sway in relation to social identities, the latter is important and would carry with it encumbrances that an artist who seeks to appeal to a diverse youth population would rather avoid. Most *genge* artists have adopted stage names that do not identify them with any ethnic group. For the purposes of *Amka Ukatike* the change of name can be seen in the light of a rejection of “structured creativity” as dictated by the protocols of the drama festival. It is the first marker of his departure from officialdom and the confines of ‘high culture’ to a liberal artistic spirit which he expresses throughout the song. For the artist, a different name and a new persona are the tools he uses to indicate change of form and style, and to subvert the intentions of an extraneous creativity which is neither “interesting nor entertaining”.

From classical to genge

The change from a Swahili *shairi* to *genge* is perhaps the most significant change in the performance of the song. The *shairi* is a highly structured form of poetry. Ntarangwi (2004), notes that *Ushairi* or Swahili poetry is the oldest form of expression in the Swahili literary arts. He further explains

that originally Swahili *mashairi* were not the rigid highly systematised literary form that exists today. Original *mashairi* were predominantly songs that indigenous peoples of the East African coast created for leisure, reflecting their day to day activities, experiences and aspirations. They were thus simple songs that were created to be easily memorised. With the advent of the Arabs and the Europeans, specifically the Portuguese to the East African coast, the poetry acquired foreign influences and evolved from a people-oriented art form into a highly systematised form of 'high art'.

The conventions of writing *shairi* demand adherence to rhythm achieved through structure of lines and stanzas, through alliteration and assonance. The poem that the student begins to recite in the drama festival as dramatised in the song is a good example of the concept of metre in the Swahili *shairi*.

*Mgeni kumpokea
Kumbe ni kujijongea
Alipokuja siku ya kwanza
Alipokewa vizuri
Alipokuja siku ya pili
Hakupokewa vizuri
Mgeni kumpokea
Kumbe ni kujidhonga*

The first three lines have the same last sound, followed by the next three, and the last two repeat the sounds in the first three. Critically speaking, meaning also becomes significant in *shairi*, and it is thus a preferred form for didactic purposes. The *shairi* quoted here explores the inconveniences associated with hosting a guest. Measure, rhythm and meaning are the advertised hallmarks of high art as discussed earlier. High art is the emphasis of the school system. *Shairi*, as utilised within the school system is the best reflection of forms of 'serious art' that according to Willis 2001:2 quoted earlier, "are meant to express absolute values about the nature of human existence in a medium which is disciplined, self-conscious and often difficult to master." This is the reason why the shift from classical Swahili to *genge* produces a shock reaction in the teachers, the obvious guardians of the structures and expressions of 'high culture' as represented by the school.

The artist has constructed a world of change as he sees it. The message of the song is that a different world is not only possible but it is desirable. That the youth should be allowed “*to do their thing*” and that they are well capable of pushing their agenda to the forefront by subverting the already existing structures and procedures. The artist’s construction of subversive possibilities is in sharp contrast to the expectations of the mother in the song *Sawa Tu*, where she refers to her daughter’s desire to represent hip-hop culture as “*stupidity*”. She would prefer her daughter to go to school and learn how to be ‘somebody’. It is this school environment and its structure that the artist seeks to subvert by introducing hip-hop in the midst of a drama festival performance. Mr. Kioko, one of the adjudicators, goes even further to refer to this rendition as “*nonsense*”:

We are here on serious matters,
Finished! Stop the nonsense, finished!
Hii kazi iishe ama tuende kufanya home work,
*We had better get down to the proper business of the day or else this performance
will be disbanded and you will all go to do your homework*
(Banging the table) finished!!

It is evident that the artist’s re-visioning of the possibilities that exist within *genge* and the appeal it has with the youth as ‘their thing’, is not a welcome proposition to the established order. However, in order for us to hypothesise on the real impact of the genre in constructing youth identities as encompassed in the call to do ‘their thing’, we must familiarise ourselves with actual reactions of young people towards the subversive central message of the song as constructed in the artist’s world and on the other hand, the emphatic rejection of that world and its suggested possibilities in the reaction of adults.

Locating the subjective moment

The search for objective possibilities requires that having discussed changing form and style and the derivative meanings from the artist’s perspective, we interrogate the perceived influences of this genre based on these changes among the targeted youth population. This will enable us to draw conclusions on the extent of the impact of the genre on the youths’ sense of being and becoming. This is what we refer to as the subjective moment. Only by exploring to the subjective experience of real individuals can we break away from the simplicity of privileging the artist’s

world and its identified dichotomies. This would enable us to suggest some of the real complex bases of connection between the music and the lives of the young people. In this regard Willis (2001: 6) advises:

If we understand some of the central concerns of particular groups, if we have an insight into what they expect from the music, if we can penetrate the symbolic and expressive dimensions of an integrated life experience, then we shall have a base from which to assess the role of pop as a living and dialectically interrelated element of a whole lifestyle. It may well be, of course, that we continue to look at more structural and “objective” factors in order to come to an appreciation of the totality of the phenomenon, but unless we have proceeded through *the located and subjective moment* we can never do more than juxtapose life and artefact in a way which is essentially random, and external to the inner connections which should be the business of social enquiry [emphasis mine].

To locate the subjective moment of the song within “the symbolic and expressive dimensions of an integrated life experience”⁴ for the youth, I presented the song to a group of school-going youth. The selected group, composed of form three students, were mostly in their mid-late teens. All the young people said they had heard the song before. The video was played to them twice. They were asked to document their reactions to the video by answering several simple questions.

- Do you like the song? Why?
- Is this a good song? Why?
- What in the song changes?
- Why does it change?
- Do you like the changes?
- Is this song relevant to your situation?

The questions were deliberately general since the purpose was to help the students give a personal opinion, not based on any specific aspects of the video, but on their general impressions of it. Students were asked to write down their individual responses to these questions. The exercise was done in groups of five to six students. Responses were collected from 11 groups.

Those respondents who said they liked the song gave reasons such as: the song is enjoyable; has nice beats; uses an easy language—Sheng; it is entertaining; funny; has a variation of beats; involves students and points to possibilities of a career in ‘showbiz’ for those who do not excel in

academics. It was also noted that the song is a good one since it features Mdomo Baggy and K.J. These two are well-known young comedians who are part of a new crop of stand-up comedians with a broad appeal to the youth. In the video, Mdomo Baggy⁵ takes the role of Mr. Kioko, the utterly disgusted adjudicator who describes the change in the drama festival presentation as “nonsense” and K.J.⁶ acts as a female adjudicator, Mrs. Muchemi. Respondents who did not like the song gave reasons such as: it has no teachings; some participants are poorly dressed for example, the third female adjudicator who takes the role of Ms. Fiona, is dressed in what the respondents considered too tight and too short a skirt. They also said that the song is out of fashion and that Sheng as used in the song is not accessible to people of all ages, and thus the song has what they considered an undesirable exclusivity. Of great concern was that the dance style and mode of dress in the song would not be acceptable to the parents of the respondents. They said that this is a song that they could only watch alone and would definitely be uncomfortable if it was played in the presence of their parents. The respondents who did not like the song also explained that it portrays what they called a negative influence on students, specifically referring to the scene where students shout down Mr. Kioko when he protests the *genge* song and dancing that had been introduced by the performer.

In regard to the changes in the song, respondents identified the change in dancing style; a change from boredom to excitement on the part of the students in the video; change of scenery in the video; shift from a poetry recital to singing; change of language from Kiswahili to Sheng; from drama festival to dance club; attire of the artist from school uniform to civilian clothing and the mood of the adjudicator from initial approval of the *shairi* to anger and disapproval when the performer shifts from *shairi* to *genge*. The reasons suggested that would explain these changes are that the audience in the video who are students were bored and that the performer needed to end the boredom and reduce monotony. The respondents who liked the changes said that they made the song lively, that they (respondents) could observe and borrow dance styles from it. In their opinion, the change removed the monotony and boredom. Those who did not like the changes said that the changes brought about confusion as the performer in the video was supposed to be reciting a *shairi*. They felt that the changes were “fighting against” the drama festival since changing

to *genge* interrupts the programme of the drama festival; the change moves from a “serious poem” into “comical fun”.

Additionally, there were those who thought the song was relevant and those that thought it was not. Relevance was seen inasmuch as the song was considered important for entertainment, relaxation and breaking the monotony of class work. It was seen as encouraging the use of talents among young people and showed the possibility of having fun during drama festivals. Reasons cited for irrelevance were that the song invites students to dance to secular music which is against Christian expectations and guidelines. *Genge* has no beneficial theme and is not educative; it encourages young people to go to clubs which would facilitate vices such as alcoholism; it would encourage girls to wear tight clothes which can encourage rape, and the teacher who crosses over to dance with the students behaves inappropriately.

Objective possibilities: A conclusion

The capacity of the young people to critically respond to the song is not in question. It is clear from their responses that they are not passive consumers of pop-music and the messages thereof, but can make critical interpretations and take positions that are reasoned. In relation to the central theme of the video as constructed in the artist's world—a re-vision that subverts institutionalized creative processes in favour of a youth ‘thing’, one quickly notes that the young people who participated in the critical process neither recognized nor legitimized this position. They appreciated the video as entertaining but any subversion of the expected order at the drama festival, including the central theme of the song, is seen as undesirable and even unacceptable.

The young people also recognize the possibilities and opportunities that exist in the pop-music industry. This poses a challenge to the traditional beliefs as stated in the quoted ballad, *Someni Vijana...* By acknowledging these opportunities, they seem to also reject the purveyors of the tension in the education vs. pop-music controversy. This is expressed by the mother in the *Sawa Tu* song earlier quoted, when she calls her daughter's ambition to represent hip-hop culture “stupidity”. This is also the position taken by Mr. Kioko, the drama teacher, when he refers to the dancing as “nonsense” and is booed by the students. Young people recognized and verbalized

the possibility of taking up a career in pop-music alongside or instead of academics.

It is also evident from the responses that young people have multiple sources of values and identity, and that pop-music is only one of them and perhaps not the most important. Parents and the Church were mentioned in the discussions and it was acknowledged that values suggested in the video are at variance with values from these other sources. A delicate process of choice and priority need be put in place. The perception of parents about pop-music seemed to be of particular concern to young people who argued that the parents' fears were unfounded. This seems a reasonable allegation given the demonstrated capacity to be critical and to cautiously approach the subversive nature of this particular song, and in fact, altogether reject its invitation to subvert. It would therefore seem that young people have an interpretation of pop-music and its possibilities that is all their own. This interpretation seeks to balance the multiple sources of values available to them. However, it rejects the narrow limitations of the adult world and its claim on "*school or school*", dismissal of opportunities in pop-music as "*stupidity*", dismissal of its entertaining role as "*nonsense*" and their insistence on "*the straight and narrow*". More importantly, it refuses to privilege the subversive world of the artist, and thus claims its own social meaning. While many contending voices exist, locating the subjective moment provides the opportunity to locate objective possibilities that exist in situating how the youth signify 'their thing'. The message in "*Lemme do m' thing*" is that young people negotiate many voices to create and define their own sense of being and becoming. "*Lemme do m' thing*" becomes a call for critical appraisal of all the tensions and voices in the context and content of pop-music, so that the positions taken and identities privileged satisfy individual sensibilities and selfhood—a negotiated and individually legitimized 'thing'.

Notes

¹ Current Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, KBC.

² *I want to be famous like Kalamashaka.*

³ Real name, (Abdulkarim Mohammed)

⁴ Willis 2001 :2

⁵ Which literally means “Big Mouth”.

⁶ John Kiarie.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Sheng as a youth identity marker: Reality or Misconception?

Nathan Oyori Ogechi

Introduction

This chapter explores the extent to which Sheng can be considered a youth identity marker in Kenya. For a while now, an impression has existed that Sheng is strictly a code used for and by the youth (Osinde, 1986; Spyropolous, 1987; Kembo-Sure, 1992; Abdulaziz and Osinde, 1998). The authenticity of this claim is questionable in the current use of the code. The essence of the present discourse is therefore to unmask whether or not the assertion holds any water. Those who speak, coin words, listen to and read 'works' in Sheng may not necessarily be the youth. These people speak Sheng and sing in it, write it, listen to it being used (in speech and music), and identify themselves with it. In a way, Sheng is an identity marker to them while it excludes those who do not know it.

Therefore, the Sheng variety will be presented as one that is variantly used as a powerful identity marker either for inclusion or exclusion of different groups in the Kenyan society. In particular, the following questions shall guide the argument. Is Sheng a youth identity marker? Who are the youth? To what extent does Sheng include or exclude the youth in general? Suppose we categorize the youth into rural and urban, to what extent can Sheng be used to negotiate identity and include or exclude both groups? To what extent can the youth be categorized along gender lines using Sheng? If Sheng is an urban phenomenon as it has been claimed (Githiora, 2002), can both urban youth and urban adults be identified with Sheng? Apart from the lexicon, what are the other cultural attributes of Sheng? If rap music and its attendant culture are some of the attributes of Sheng, are rappers youth? I explore some of these questions.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The use of a particular language or language variety in the creation, negotiation and reflection of one's identity has been investigated for a long

time (Mazrui, 1995; Muranga, 2002; Ramsay-Brijball, 2004; Myers-Scotton, 2006). The term 'identity' can be defined variously depending upon one's professional or academic background. In general, however, identity has something to do with the way people are categorized (identified) either by themselves and/or by others along the lines of race, nationality, ethnicity, culture, sex and gender. Of all cultural elements, language is a powerful instrument of marking identity (and belonging).

Language (be it a stable or unstable code) is an index of some identity so that individuals who know it, can use it as a tool of inclusion for in-group members or tool of exclusion for the out-group members.¹ For this to occur, there must be a conscious (but mostly an unconscious) negotiation of identity through the code choices that the speakers make. Indeed Coulmas (2006: 56) observes that:

...speakers, rather than being just the bearers of abstract structures removed from a conscious reflection constraining their speech behaviour are active knowledgeable purposeful agents who make choices whenever they use language. The ability to do so is at the heart of the nexus between language and society... It holds for every level of language, structural and stylistic, and beyond that for the registers and languages used by different groups in different domains of society.

Thus, different code choices identify different groups as various theoretical approaches have shown, regardless of their limitations. For instance, the socio-psychological approaches such as Tajfel's (1974, 1981) social identity theory and Berry's (1980) theory of acculturation assume a one-to-one identity. According to this view, members belong to a homogenous ethnolinguistic community which has a monolingual, monocultural, linear and unidirectional bias (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004: 47). Unfortunately, this is not true because the approach fails to recognise the existence of hybrid identities (Maganda, 2006) and the complex linguistic repertoires of bilingual speakers in the present global world.

Gumperz's (1982) interactional model appreciates bilingualism and code choice, which results in either the 'we' or 'they' codes identity. According to Gumperz, the codes classified as "we-codes" are for interaction with one's in-group members, while the "they-codes" are for less personal and out-group relations. The selection of a "we-code" implies cooperation as the default choice in speech behaviour between

interlocutors. Therefore, the emphasis here is on reciprocity for maintaining cooperation (Coulmas, 2006: 61) among the 'we' members. The assumption of this model is that there are always two identities in society yet, in essence, speakers can negotiate multiple identities especially in multilingual and diglossic societies depending upon situation and context. This is reflected in Kamwangamalu's (1998) expansion of Gumperz's model to include a third "code-in-between". The "code-in-between" provides for an identity that is neutral as it is neither one for intimacy nor one for projecting distance among the interactants. That is, depending upon the identity the speakers want to project, they can opt for a "we-code" at a given context. At another context, the same speaker(s) can choose a "they-code" while in yet another context the "code-in-between" is the default choice. In Kamwangamalu's expanded model these identities are negotiated. This line of argument is closely followed in Myers-Scotton's (1993, 2006) markedness model. Though initially designed to explain codeswitching, the markedness model emphasizes a negotiation of the balance of rights and obligations (RO) between speakers. It posits that speakers choose a code that would symbolize the rights and obligations they wish to enforce in the exchange in question and index the appropriate identities. She explains the RO index through the metaphor of power thus:

Power as a theoretical construct of relations between groups and individuals is identified by its asymmetrical nature. Power exists in relationships through one participant having more control over other factors that affect the other participant. Of course, participants may have equal power in a relationship, but more often, they do not. While such interpersonal attributes as degree of solidarity are relatively open to negotiation in interpersonal relationship, power is harder to nudge because of its resources. That is, power asymmetries tend to rely on what participants bring to the interaction in terms of their sociolinguistic profiles. *Power tends to accrue to those with "right" attributes (e.g. a high level of formal education at the right universities, membership in the right ethnic group, practitioners in the right occupations, males rather females etc.)* (emphasis mine).

If power accrues to those with the "right" attributes and gives them membership (read identity), then users of a certain code may be deemed to be equipped with the power of that code to negotiate their in-group identity while excluding others (so-called out-group members). This includes those people who lack the knowledge of that powerful code.

Besides the power of the code's lexicon, there can be other non-linguistic attributes that could be associated (but not always) with codes such as dress code, mannerisms, behaviour and the topics of discussions that the speakers of the code indulge in. Therefore, people of different classes, gender, ethnic and age groups use codes differently. They also transform their linguistic norms and associated identities "*through microstructures of interaction*" (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004: 11). What this implies is that people (same person or different persons) can manipulate and use a single code (language variety) in different ways. While some can use that variety as a powerful out-group variety to reflect resistance to its use, others may use the same variety as a powerful tool and index of an in-group variety to reflect their solidarity.

To develop my argument, I invoke the approach that takes language as a powerful tool and an index of inclusion or exclusion. Sheng (the lexicon and its associated non-linguistic elements) is a powerful tool that indexes inclusion for some members while it excludes others in the Kenyan society. I assess whether or not the claim that Sheng is a youth identity marker is a reality or misconception.

Data

The data used in this chapter come from earlier studies on Sheng. Additional data were collected from university students of my sociolinguistics (January–April 2007) classes. These are students in their third year of study and fall in the 21–25 age-bracket. After several lectures on the subject of sociolinguistics and specifically the topic of language contact including Sheng and Engsh, I requested them to write for me words and expressions in Sheng. The task required the following: those words and expressions used by women to discuss men, those used by men to talk about women and those used by both groups. The assignment was done over-night. I also use data that I collected (Ogechi, 2005) on the language of sex and HIV/AIDS among university students.

Youth

There exists no straightforward definition about who the youth are. This is because various countries have different age-bases for defining one's eligibility for special treatment under the law as a youth. However, it is

generally assumed that a youth is a person that is neither a child nor an adult. At present, the Kenya government through the Ministry of Youth Affairs considers youth as those between 18 and 35 years old. In spite of this definition, I consider a Kenyan youth as one aged between 13 and 35 (Ogechi, 2007). By so doing, I capture the age-bracket of both the secondary school-going persons and those who have just completed tertiary level education as well as those who have started their careers. Also included here are the adolescents—‘the linguistic hothouse’ usually associated with slang (de Klerk and Antrobus, 2004: 266). Subsequently, anyone aged 36 years and above is not a youth. The youth studied here are urban and rural dwellers.

Sheng—identity marker

Sheng is an unstable code whose grammar is largely but not always based on Kiswahili with a highly lexicalized vocabulary that is sourced from various codes blended with several innovations (Ogechi, 2004; 2005). The following are examples of Sheng:

Msee mpandhree amenokii na manzi msapere.

‘An Indian man has fallen in love with a Kikuyu girl’.

Hanyee ilibamba vinoma sana.

‘The night out was very exciting’.

The precise periodization of the advent of Sheng is not clear and different scholars give their different views. For instance, Mazrui (1995) claims that a Sheng-like code existed in the Nairobi underworld in the 1930s among pick-pockets. On her part, Spyropolous (1987) suggests that Sheng was in use in the 1950s but only assumed prominence in the 1970s. Osinde (1986) and Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) follow this position when they also assert that Sheng emerged as a peer youth code in the low socio-economic eastern suburbs of Nairobi in the 1970s.

We need not belabour the mystery of the origins of Sheng as it is clear that the code indeed exists and is used in Kenya. There is evidence that the code is grammatically highly unstable (Myers-Scotton, 2002; Ogechi, 2003; 2005) as it is largely based on (a) lexifying code(s). The lexifiers are many since Sheng’s matrix language (ML) varies depending on the language of wider communication in the area where the Sheng data is collected (Ogechi, 2004). Suffice to emphasise however that Kiswahili is

the most highly documented lexifier of Sheng (Osinde, 1986; Myers-Scotton, 2001).

Although the grammar of Sheng is based on another code, its lexicon is semantically unique. The words could have surfaced morphemes that resemble those of a stable code but they are highly lexicalized in that their meaning is different. For instance, *pata doo poa* has *doo* (dough – money) and *poa* (cool) sourced from English and Kiswahili respectively. However, the meaning of the two words in the Sheng context is different from what each word means in the source language. I have stated elsewhere that once the lexemes leave their source language(s) to be used in Sheng, they assume a new meaning (sense) altogether (Ogechi, 2005). This tallies with another assertion, namely, “*Sheng is a lexical issue and that the lexicon is the most productive area in the study of identity negotiation in Sheng*” (Githinji, 2005 cited in Githinji, 2006: 447). Falling from this argument, Sheng is here treated as an identity marker in the sense that it is highly lexicalized and its lexicon is only intelligible to a few in-group members to whom it is a powerful identity marker while it powerfully excludes those that do not know it. Various groups will use different varieties of Sheng to mark themselves out from others.

Sheng and youth identity

It cannot be gainsaid that a majority of inquiries perceive Sheng as a youth phenomenon (Osinde, 1986; Spyropoulos, 1987; Mazrui and Mphande, 1990; Kembo-Sure, 1992). This however needs to be further qualified in the sense that various groups among this age-bracket use different unique varieties. The different groups among the youth include adolescents, college students and young working people (those of the low class and those in the higher classes). Nzunga (2002: 77) captures this categorization when he claims that “*Sheng is spoken by young children who have not attained school age, adolescents and young working people of all social classes*” Given my conceptualization of the youth (age 18 to 35), I do assess Sheng as an identity marker among those not in the school age.

Adolescents

The youth’s language is highly imaginative and innovative and is usually out of the mainstream language use. For instance, the adolescent group of

the youth have unique distinctive traits. de Klerk and Antrobus (2007: 266) observe that they have:

an intense preoccupation with clothing, other adornments, and general social behaviour, of which language is an important part... it is in adolescence where linguists discover the highest levels of linguistic innovation, because of the high density of their social networks.

One of the codes that adolescents use in Kenya is Sheng. My interview with the youth at Moi University seemed to concur with de Klerk and Antrobus. The students claimed that it is highly likely but not always true that the youth who sport studs on their earlobes, have a penchant for jeans trousers, wear headbands, have plaited hair, rastas, hair piece or dreadlocks on their heads, speak and identify each other through Sheng among other markers of identity. Some but not all youth have these characteristics.

As already indicated, adolescents are a linguistic hothouse. Some among them, could use an imaginative and innovative 'private language'—Sheng—often with the intention of being ambiguous and misunderstood in order to exclude outsiders from their group. Their choice of Sheng is not due to lack of a language of wide-communication but for the need to create an identity specific to that particular group. As de Klerk and Antrobus (2004: 266) emphasize it *"is a shared linguistic code, reinforcing group membership, and indicating shared knowledge and interests and the all-important sense of belonging."* So, whereas Kiswahili is the language of wider communication in much of urban Kenya besides the existence of other indigenous languages, Sheng appears to be the preferred and default code choice. The adolescents are largely high school students and according to Nzunga (2002), the Sheng of adolescents is rich in gastronomic vocabulary. It also carries truncated names (of the Sheng variety) of the schools that they attend. This lexicon distinguishes them not just from the rest of society in general but also from the rest of the youth:

nyame, nyaki	'meat'
chipo, chiba	'french fries'
chapo	'chapati – favourite Kenyan dish'
pango	'Pangani Girls' High School
Jamuu	Jamhuri High School
	(Nzunga, 2002: 90–1)

By using such vocabulary, the adolescents in the largely urban schools with *shengnised* place names are identified *vis-à-vis* society in general and the non-urbanised youth in particular.

University level youth

There are indications that although a lot of the lower academic level Sheng vocabulary is carried over to the university institutions, it acquires an academic tint or a delicate semantic value (Nzungu, 2002: 90). Thus, whereas it is not possible to claim that university students do not share the Sheng vocabulary with what the rest of the society uses, some vocabulary is unique to them. Such a change is in itself negotiation of another identity *vide* a powerful code—Sheng. For instance, discussion about sex and HIV/AIDS vividly illustrates identity construction through Sheng. The HIV/AIDS pandemic afflicts Kenyan society in general and Sheng is one of the codes used to discuss it. However, the choice of code, particularly the diction for describing the pandemic will construct an identity that is unique to various categories of the youth. My study among university students (Ogechi, 2005: 130) indicates that the creation and lexicalization of Sheng words and expressions about sex and HIV/AIDS that I collected is largely restricted to the university students as its creation and use is logically associated with the youth's learning environment. For example, the main preoccupation of university students is reading and writing. Thus the tools used in these tasks are associated with the human body organs and how they are used during sexual intercourse.

<i>patia lekchas</i> ('give lectures')	> make love
<i>raaba</i> ('pencil rubber')	> condom
<i>kalamu</i> ('pen')	> penis

Indeed, some of these Sheng lexemes could be used by other youth but it is most likely that university students will easily understand them and therefore use them as a powerful tool to negotiate their identity. Furthermore, although the foregoing examples can be associated with the general university student fraternity activities, the following examples were most likely initially coined and identifiable with university students studying engineering courses.

<i>pima oil</i> ('measure oil')	> make love
<i>injin imenoki</i> ('engine has knocked')	> contract a sexually transmitted disease
<i>fungua buut</i> ('open a car boot')	> practise homosexuality

People who deal with vehicles know that they frequently have to ascertain the level of oil in their vehicles' engines using a dipstick. In Kiswahili, that act is called *kupima oili* ('ascertaining the oil level'). This is done by removing the dipstick from the oil aperture in the engine casing, wiping it, dipping it into the aperture again and removing it to read the oil level.

In addition, an engine that has 'knocked' ceases functioning. This failure to function is due to lack of oil or some other mechanical reason. In the context of love making, engine is associated with either the male or female genital organs. These organs could 'knock' if they are infected and therefore do not function normally—a situation that could be experienced if one is a HIV/AIDS case.

A *boot* is the rear part of a car. It can be opened and used to carry luggage while the front is where the driver and passenger sit. It is not normal for the driver to open the boot and drive from there. The youth associate this abnormal use of the car-boot with practising homosexuality. Thus *kufungua buut* refers to sodomy, which has a role in the prevalence of HIV/AIDS cases.

These youth's level of education and training has empowered them to coin and use such terms that are largely intelligible among themselves and hence it is their 'we-code' for their 'we-' identity.

Urban *vis-à-vis* rural youth

Another angle of identity is whether or not Sheng distinguishes the urban youth from the rural ones. I consider towns and cities especially those with multi-ethnic dwellers urban while other settlements without these attributes are rural. In most urban settlements with some modicum of industrialization, one finds the elite suburbs where the high income earners live, on the one hand, and the low class estates where the low income earners reside, on the other hand. The main language of communication in Kenyan urban settlements is Kiswahili although English could be the default code choice among the dwellers of the elite estates. The vernaculars are usually the language of wider communication in rural areas although Kiswahili (being a national language) can also be used (Ogechi, 2003). Despite this language-use scenario, since the advent of Sheng, the code has been associated not only with the urban youth but specifically with

the youth from the low-income estates (Abdulaziz and Osinde, 1997; Kembo-Sure, 1992; King'ei, 2001; Mkangi, 1984). That is why poverty and low levels of education were used as defining characteristics that gave birth to Sheng. Mkangi (1984 cited in Kingei, 2001: 6) asserts:

Sheng can be seen as a response to a dichotomized and discriminatory sociolinguistic environment. This situation was given rise to by the deliberately planned urban environment designed to reflect, perpetuate and stress the country's socio-economic class distinctions founded and perfected by the colonial government at the turn of the 19th century. This is illustrated by the fact that all manufacturing industries were located in the eastern part of the city of Nairobi where poor uneducated Africans were hired as cheap labour and forced to live in crowded estates with minimal social services such as schools or hospitals. Sheng was therefore, a reaction to the challenge of a life of deprivation and segregation in a stratified and hierarchical society with all the attendant class-based differentiations.

This skewed perception has been reinforced by Sheng's polar code, Engsh. According to Nzunga (2002: 88) Engsh is used by the children of the Kenyan elite and certainly by those in the western suburbs of Nairobi (Abdulaziz and Osinde, 1997). However, there are no pointers that Sheng is only used by the poor and 'uneducated' urban youth. To begin with, Mazrui's (1995) inquiry proved that the youth from both the eastern and western suburbs of Nairobi used the code for solidarity. Indeed, he argued that class differentiation in the western sense is not fully developed in Kenya. Secondly, the fact that university students, an elite group, presently also use Sheng illustrates that Sheng is not an identity marker for the poor urban youth. Furthermore, not all universities in Kenya are located in urban centres yet Sheng is prevalent in all universities.

What is interesting is that in as much as Sheng (as widely known) originated and is in wide currency in the cities, it has spread to the rural areas. The Sheng speaking youth in urban centres and those in boarding schools have a powerful influence on those in the rural areas. The former are seen as being trendy and 'better' than those who do not speak Sheng. They can rap and talk of an urban "*heng*" (disco) lifestyle that the rural folk hanker for. Thus the latter are easily attracted by the power of Sheng and learn it. The spread and acquisition of Sheng lexicon is enhanced by the rap music that is popular among the youth (urban and rural). They

confront social issues, frankly discussing sex, relationships, and AIDS. As Sampers (2004: 39) observed:

Locally produced rap music's popularity in Kenya has recently been on the rise. What started as simple imitation of American rap in local clubs and competitions has blossomed into a truly Kenyan cultural form. Part of this success has come from the use of Sheng, Kiswahili, and vernacular languages in the songs. The use of local languages, but especially Sheng, has helped.

The spread of Sheng first from urban areas to rural areas shows that it is very difficult presently for one to safely claim that Sheng is an identity marker of only the urban youth. Indeed, the rappers do not just address themselves to the urban youth but to all. The rappers themselves, popularly known as *Genge* fall in the category I have defined as youth. They are aged between 16 and 30 years and they include Nonini, Abbas Kubuff, Flex, Jua Cali, Kleptomaniacs. They rap on topics close to the youth, such as sex, drugs, alcohol, women and partying. Sample the following song by Circuite and Joel about safe sex in the era of HIV/AIDS. The song contains a lot of Sheng words and is very popular not just among the urban youth but also among the rural youth.

Manyake.... all sizes

manyake ... kama prizes

Manyake... kama 'loons zina maji

Juala ndio wahitaji x3

Ok alright ungejua *manyake*

Sawa definitely za mchick msawa ndio *manyake*

Blow job, tembelea wasee

This is what they usually say.

Tunashare *manyerere* x2

Mikono juu kuworship *manyerere*

Kwanza tutumie protection

Au sivyo disease ije haraka kama injection

African men wakiwa obsessed na manyake

'Opposed? ... what's up?

Do you have have some *juala* x2

Ama sivyo ucheki ceiling ya mochari kama fala

Tumia protection yoo!

Refrain

Juala ni ashuu tuu!

Na bado mnacheza na maisha mandugu

Hata kama manyerere ni poa aje jua ndio wahitaji.

Cheki hizi facts na hizi figures

Wasee soo tano wanadedi dailly

It's like wanabondwa na madinga

Ati you want bila protection,

mimi napinga haa!

Hiyo napinga wee mjinga

Bila protection napinga

Ee naongea kuhusu manyake

na si zile za butcher

manyake zinapita mtu anakula kucha

si unajua zile zenye zimefura

kama zako hazijafura unafaa uende ukule mtura

halafu ungoje, pengine watu watakupigia kura

manyake loo! Mtu anaweza kuziworship

manyake zinafanya mtu alose friendship

Ebu enda kwa club, watu wanafight kwa nini

Pastor alikosana na wife kwa sababu ya nini?

Lakini usichanganishwe akili kwa sababu ya mwili

Tumia juala ama utaharibu mwili

Hiyo ni ukweli joo!

Translation

Female genitals ... all sizes

Female genitals.... like prizes

Female genitals... like watery loos

A condom is what you need x3

Ok alright, if you knew (what) *manyake*

Definitely yes, one for a good lady are *manyake*

Then do the blow job, visit friends.

This is what they usually say.

We share girls x2

We raise up hands to glorify the girls.

But first let us use protection

Otherwise disease will fall in fast like an injection

When African men are obsessed by girls.

Are you opposed to this? What is up?

Do you have some condoms?
Otherwise you will stare at a mortuary ceiling like a fool.
Friend, use a condom.

Refrain

A condom costs only ten shillings
And friends you are only joking around with life
It (condom) is what you need even if the girls are fantastic.

Look at the facts and figures
Five hundred people die daily
It is as if they are being crushed by vehicles
If you want it (sex) without protection,
I oppose it
You fool, I oppose it
Without protection I oppose

Yes, I am talking about *manyake* (female genitals)
Not those of a butcher
When they (girls) pass by, one bites his nails
I hope you know those “swollen” ones
If there are any that are not swollen, then go and eat *mtura* (local sausage)
Then wait, perhaps people will vote you in
Yes female genitals, one could worship them
They could lead to one losing a friend.
Just go to a club and find out why people fight.
Why did the pastor quarrel with his wife?
Do not lose your mind because of bodily desires
Use a condom otherwise you spoil your body
That is the truth friend!

The lexemes *manyake* (‘female genital’) and *juala* (‘condom’) are used in the *Manyake* song. It has elsewhere been claimed that *manyake* refers to meat (Nzunga, 2002). However, in the context of the song, *manyake* refers to female genitals. This is made clear in the fourth stanza “*Eeh naongea kuhusu manyake, na wala si zile za butcher*” (‘Eeh, I am talking about girls’ genitals and not meat found at the butchery’). The picture is enhanced further when the singers use *manyake* as a metonym for the girls and their genitals that drive men crazy—“*manyake zikipita mtu anakula kucha*” (‘when the girls (and their genitals) pass by, men are left looking at them biting their nails’). In addition, they make men quarrel and even fight—“*manyake zafanya mtu alose friendship*. Hebu enda klabu watu wanafight kwa nini?”

(girls' genitals can make one lose friendship. Just go to a pub and find out why men are fighting').

In stanza one, the song refers to the use of a condom (*juala*) when a person encounters these girls' genitals—"manyake kama 'loons na maji. *Juala ndio wahitaji*" (Girls' genitals are like balloons with water. A condom is what you need'). It is obvious that the *juala* is referring to a condom because the singers talk of its cheap price—*ashuu* ('ten Kenya shillings') (Ogechi, 2004: 334) as seen in the stanza 2 refrain "*juala ni ashuu tu na bado mnacheza na maisha mandugu*" (a condom costs only ten shillings yet you are still gambling with your lives brothers).

This song and others like it are played and aired by radio and TV stations. Thus, the music reaches both rural and urban youth who sing along with musicians, identify with the song, and by extension the Sheng used therein. The songs are also played in discos where the presiding disco jockeys are mostly youthful and they also rap in Sheng.

Sheng and gender among youth

It has been claimed that gender differences are manifest in code choice (Coates, 1989). The use of Sheng may not be an exception especially when one follows Mazrui's (1995) contention that Sheng has characteristics of slang. If this is true, then Sutton's (1995) claim that there is prevalent use of slang among more men than women could be assumed also on Sheng. However, other works such as Maurer (1976), Herzler (1965) and de Klerk and Antrobus (2004) have noted tendencies for women to encroach on this all-male precinct. Both sexes use Sheng especially to discuss or gossip about the 'other' sex, more so on matters of beauty, handsomeness and sex. For instance, the following words are in vogue on naming the 'other'.

Men talking about women

<i>Yule shore ana haga</i>	That girl has huge hips
<i>Yule demu ana gondo</i>	That lady is pregnant
<i>Lwagza/Michelin</i>	Nice legs
<i>Anastua/hayuko mchezoni/Ni ong'ang'o</i>	She is ugly/not pretty.
<i>Yule manzi ana matuzo/manyundos</i>	That girl has a big bust.

Women talking about men

<i>Reptail/casper/oboho/ofwenya</i>	bad looking guy/not handsome
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good looking guy (Women use names of celebrities especially movie stars and musicians whom they consider attractive)

It appears that both sexes use Sheng. The only notable difference is that they use different words to describe some characteristics that are the same. There can be no guarantee that these words are not known by the other group. What is certain is that as soon the opposite group learns the words used, particularly the pejorative, new words will be coined.

Youth versus adults

Sheng, like other unstable codes in Africa (e.g. Tsotitaal and Iscamto in South African, Indoubil in Ivory Coast, Camfranglais in Cameroun), originated and was first used by the youth. However, it is now obvious that it is used by adults (Githiora, 2002; Ogechi, 2005). It is notable, for example, that in Nairobi the street children are the main users of Sheng. Some of them are no longer children but adults who are raising street families through Sheng. Other notable adults who speak it include Ballack Muluka, a *Saturday Standard* columnist and managing director of Mvule Publishers. He particularly reminisces about the Sheng variety that he and others used in the 1970s. The variety, he avers, is quite distinct from the one that is presently in vogue.

My informants at Moi University also reported that the Sheng-speaking youth, especially in urban centres address adults, notably their parents, in Sheng. The parents will often respond in either Kiswahili, English, mother tongue or codeswitching although some do respond in Sheng. In such cases, an entire family uses Sheng. If using Sheng in such an interaction is to be deemed identity, then both youth and adults negotiate identity through Sheng. By the adults choosing to speak in Sheng, they are accommodating speech in order to enhance solidarity (Giles and Powelsland, 1975).

Conclusion

This chapter sought to find out whether or not Sheng is a youth identity marker in Kenya. The discussion showed that Sheng is indeed a powerful marker of identity. However, the identity appears not to be static; rather it

is negotiated and keeps on changing. Various factors determine the identity that is negotiated. Thus there are times when Sheng is an identity marker of the youth although not all youth know the code. It also came out that it is possible for some adults to identify themselves with the youth *vide* Sheng and at such times, some youth may be excluded since they do not know Sheng. On balance, the article shows that the perception that Sheng is a youth identity marker may have been overtaken by time.

The claim that there are some non-linguistic features such as clothing and hair styles that are associated with Sheng speakers and youth needs further research. Further inquiry also needs to be done to find out the association of the code with the underworld activities.

Notes

¹ Those who do not know the code.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Me, My KENYA and I

Charles A. Matathia

It is true that you know that you are growing old when all your conversations start with “...remember those days...” or, “*The children of today...*” Every day you sound more and more like your mother which is, without a doubt, to sound like a broken record. But truth be told, things have changed. It has been two decades since I was weaned on Nyayo milk and schooled on Nyayo philosophy. Now I worry for my kids, if ever I have any, considering the capricious constitution of Campus brews. Our children we shall feed from bottles calibrated in degrees proof and percentage volume and not the decilitres and millilitres of our infancy.

In my primary school days our teachers were prim and proper. They were ladies and gentlemen. Paragons. Even mentors. The teachers of today, however, are the epitome of *cool*; dudes and dudettes who you met at the club and they scream (or is it *hola*?) “*walapa!*” Give you a hug and throw you a *ra-o*. In days gone by, for us kids, disco was an unutterable word. Disco was the privilege of black sheep-uncles and as inconceivable to our juvenile minds as sex. Today disco is a dated word. They call it the *hanye* now and it is a place where your daddy comes in alone and leaves with your sixteen year old classmate. *Maisha iko sawa, au sio?*

And what language do they teach school children these days as they titter and tattle like FM radio presenters with adolescent hangovers. If these were our days, I would imagine the Swahili teacher striding into class and declaring: “*Kondomu ni Bora Kuliko Katiba.*” *Jadili!* But who cares for debate sessions and moot courts now when you can hop into your air-conditioned school bus and attend the real thing; there is always some Goldenberg inquiry this and a *Margarya Something* or other going on, so take your pick. And while at it you can get the autographs of the leading protagonists. Oh, the joys of the modern school system. I cross the floor!

But really, things have changed these days I tell you. The hullabaloo on television, the newspapers and bar-room counters these last couple of

years, has been about condoms, constitution and Kenya's national beverage, alcohol. I never heard about condoms and constitutions growing up. But there was alcohol, beer that is, and it came with the prescription, '*Mbili Mbili Baada ya Kazi*'. All that changed years later when some fellows went out and packed some foul napalm-like filth in condom-sized sachets for the youth to drink, *Badala ya Kazi*.

In those days the health system worked. Pumwani was a Maternity Hospital and not a mortality hospital. AIDS was a myth, rhythm was the preferred method of family planning and our parents didn't need an HIV compliance certificate to make babies.

Those days, there was only one political party and Parliament was a formality. Your MP went to Nairobi to take care of his import/export business and not to throw fruit at idlers and the ever increasing hordes of the unemployed at Uhuru Park. Your MP was more concerned with how to import cheap sugar from a non-sugar producing country and not how to get elected to some oddball parliamentary committee on '*deconstitutionalising*' the constitution.

Back then, we had a President and not a presidency. The president made headlines just for waking up in the morning, but mostly because he was out building gabions with the proletariat and not toasting with the literati. You knew the president because you saw him buying bananas in your village and not just eating them at Governor's Mansion. The President hired you because he wanted to and not because your clansman said so. He spoke and you listened and his retort to the insults of nondescript MPs would not have been "*pumbavu!*"

Indeed times have changed. It is as though tyranny doesn't live here anymore. All our creative pursuits, our expression, were geared towards glorifying God—the Christian God to be precise—and the King. We sang and danced for them and at their mercy and never for ourselves. Those were the days when, you made your own Nyatiti, Nderemo or Kayamba and played *Tawala Kenya* for Music Class. These days, you meet your music teacher at the *hanye* and he tells you, "*Wee Kamu...Juala ndio wahitaji...*" So much for the freedom of expression we have earned!

So many things have changed over the years, and so much hasn't. Since gaining its independence in December 1963, Kenya has had three presidents only. Does that count for change? The first two presidents had

lengthy reigns. They acquired identities of their own and built a kind of mythical persona around themselves that would have been as quaint as it was peculiar if only the range of powers and the egocentric manner they wielded didn't mean that their idiosyncrasies were constantly used to define the character of this nation.

After living under the shadows, the mercy and the whims of autocratic rulers, a national character that could be defined as essentially Kenyan could not emerge and even if it did, it could not be expressed with unbridled honesty. Unless the Kenyan character was clearly that of 'what-will-be-will-be'; of apathy and everyone bothering only to find his own bread and take care of his own. Although this last characteristic was the one that seemed clearly evident, it would be improper to use it to define a national identity. That characteristic was a reaction rather than an expression of who we were. It was our way of dealing with the ever-increasing limitations to our freedom of expression that existed in those days.

With the emergence of a new president, giving credit where it is due, Kenyans began to find more avenues of expressing themselves and subsequently of living and questioning the way they lived and the freedoms due to them, which they had always taken for granted. Suddenly a sense of pride in being Kenyan could be felt both at home and right through the Diaspora. Really, even those who had fled the tumult of the early nineties and the economic disintegration that had plagued this country since *circa* 1992 could be heard talking about this country with a sense of entitlement (albeit with a condescending view point from the foreign places where they lived and, as they claimed, where things worked). *"You know, here in America (or Europe, Australia and everywhere else Kenyan economic exiles dwell) the streets are cleaned at night and that is what we have to do in OUR country..."* Kenya's Diaspora ranted on internet forum boards and letters to the editor. Some of them even abandoned their hitherto Kenyan dreams of flipping burgers in America to return to the motherland. They were coming back, as they said, 'to build the nation'.

And build the nation they did. Suddenly executive apartments were springing out of the backyards of Nyayo Era white elephants to quench the expanding yuppie class' thirst for prestigious addresses. South African retailers who had been trickling in half-heartedly in the last decade, poured in and even the Chinaman rushed in with his mass-produced weapons of

copyright destruction searching for a new dumpsite. The Nairobi Stock Exchange was flung wide open creating a new class of 'Kengen' millionaires and gave the drinking class a new field of expertise as they began to trade 'insider' information on the next IPO over *nyama choma* and Tusker. Kenya had come of age. The nation, that always had its owners, had new owners. True, the gap between the rich and the poor continued to grow exponentially, but a huge and discernible middle-class was emerging.

Even the Kenyan flag became liberated and began to appear on the chests and heads of Kenyans. It wasn't just a school parade ground ritual that was easily forgotten anymore, but an object of pride raised everyday in the T-shirts and caps of Kenyans everywhere. And when people begin to rally around a national flag—a symbol of national unity—then you know that they have internalised a certain identity. And in this case, the identity was inarguably Kenyan.

But when I approach the issue of identity and definitions, at the risk of being pigeonholed within denizens of certain schools of Social Scientific thought, I like to argue that identity is an individual struggle. Granted that the biased court of Public Opinion, Academics and other Purveyors of Pedantry will always purport to define and rationalise the boundaries—set the parameters within which one must fit to be a Kenyan, an African, a hero or a saint—it is always the individual that accepts those definitions or allows himself to fit within their embrace.

More often than not and consequent to the human capacity for self-delusion and the endless quest for conformity and the acceptance it brings, this self-indulgent fit becomes a misfit. People attempt to pigeonhole themselves into categories that they believe suit them—especially those that connote a better class of human being. They do so even when, more often than not, they do not fit there and can never be appreciated by those others who in their self-righteousness believe that that space is theirs and theirs alone to accept and/or deny access to.

Yet there are people who by virtue of being considered unworthy of an individual voice have their identities defined for them. These are the hordes that exist in the sub-human levels of Deviant, Miscreant, Illiterate, Savage, Pagan, Neurotic, Heathen; The Bestial *Others* who Subsist on the Treacherous Irrationality of the Id. These Sub-Humans are forced into their own private and exclusive categories by others because human nature

dictates that we have to classify those who we do not understand within the parameters that we understand: skin colour, *our* religion, tribe and ethnicity, sexual orientation; all those things that we are and *They* are not. So what is the place of the *They*—the insignificant *Others*? Are they doomed to wallow in the silence of their pre-defined identity and consequently accept that definition? When do these individuals break away from the boundaries within which others tether them and acquire, each by his/her own models of truth and sense of self-worth, first of all to acquire a private definition of the self, and finally of the self as a constituent of a collective whole such as Nation, Race, Religion?

Unfortunately, finding the self is a right that is continually denied to those of us who have always found ourselves forced to embrace the *They* profile in all its arbitrariness. This is not because we think it to be a perfect fit for us but because we have been told—by those who apparently know—that that is our place. Yet all those categories that we are thrust into are so fluid, their definitions ever-changing, that we can never understand who we are. If they, who have given themselves the mandate of defining us and on whom we depend for an understanding of our sense of self do not know how to define us consistently, then how can we know who we really are? So we are doomed to spend our pitiful existence trying to internalise the myriad ways others perceive us, accepting their heroes and shunning their villains (even though they happen to be us or people like us), so much so that we become lost even to ourselves.

I was born in July 1979. That was in the reign of Daniel arap Moi. Daniel Moi who came into power with a pledge to follow in the footsteps (*fuata nyayo*) of Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. What those footsteps were, I cannot tell. I wasn't there in Jomo's days, you know, to see him leave his imprint on the paths of a new nation; to see him shape our collective destiny and lead us towards a feeling of belonging, of being part of this nation called Kenya. Of course I have read a lot about Jomo. How could I not have? He was the Founding Father of this nation and our history text books were all about him. He was the father of the nation, the father of the state and, it would seem, the father of our history. And because Kenyatta was the epitome of the adage that history is written by the victors, our national heritage—the long and torturous struggle for independence—suffered him as sole hero and all others as 'also-rans' at the instance of the birth of this nation.

This is how my history textbook came to dedicate an entire chapter to Jomo Kenyatta and one paragraph to Kimathi Waciiri. All over my history books, in newspaper cuttings and in the living rooms of every Kikuyu man that I knew, I saw a Kenyatta resplendent in leather jacket or ceremonial skins looking into the future with dignity, flywhisk in hand and waving with an autocratic grace that punctuated the caption: *Mutongoria Njamba* / hero and leader. But I can remember seeing only one photo of Kimathi—a grainy affair, hair in matted locks, handcuffed and a thin blanket about him. In my history books, Kimathi was still shackled. As I grew older that image began to haunt me. Then the haunting turned into a deep-seated pain that was constantly awakened by the Kikuyu saying, Nairobi (Kenya, really) was shared out when people were sleeping.

That saying and the photos of the two independence heroes coalesced into a kind of metaphor for this nation in my mind. Some Kenyans had inherited the monkey skin, meaning control over the means of production, while others had inherited the shackles—cursed to forever feed from the foot of Dive's table; slaves in their own land that was shared out while they were out fighting for it. Everywhere I looked around me, I saw heart-breaking social economic disparities that continued to be entrenched with an utter disregard for merit. But every year we would troop out—together as one united nation of Kenyans—on one day, that we called *Jamhuri* / Republic Day, to celebrate the anniversary of our independence; the birth of our nation, our sovereignty. On that day millions of Kenyans flocked our parks and stadia in jubilation, the elders telling us (the young ones) tales of how that fine day in 1963 Kisozi Muriyoti raised the Kenyan flag—banner of our national identity—on the highest point of our young nation. Green was for the land, black for the people, red was for the blood that was shed and white for the peace that the blood was poured out for.

Jamhuri Day, year in, year out, we came to listen to speeches in celebration of *matunda ya uhuru* / fruits of our independence. Our ground forces marched past in a colourful show of might and our Air Force flew past in formation, saluting not just His Excellency the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Kenya but every citizen of this nation. Then the traditional dancers, the praise singers and myriad court jesters came out to play. We applauded. Kenyans. We who dwelt in Unity, Peace and Liberty.

We who? We who sat on the flag bedecked dais, snoozing and waiting for the State House banquet, or we who sat out in the scorching sun, our mouths parched and our stomachs rumbling? How could we, sitting on different sides of the parade, all claim justice to be our shield and defender; they sitting in the pavilion with our national flag sheltering them from the blistering heat and us braving the midday sun while shoving and kicking at each other just to catch a glimpse of them? Maybe because they had won the Independence and we had won Dependence. Dependence on a black rather than a white master. Was that not Kenya's heritage, our history as written by the victorious to shape our collective destiny? There was always and would be two kinds of Kenyans—those who were free and those who were shackled.

And when Moi came to power, almost a year before I was born, that was the history that he had to perpetuate, the status quo he swore to maintain when he took over the mantle of leadership. Those were the footsteps Kenyatta, the founding father of the Kenyan nation, had set and which Moi in one declaration—*fuata nyayo*¹ pledged to follow. And he followed them so well as to become not only the father of the nation but he claimed to be the mother too. Moi became '*baba namba moja*' and '*mama namba moja*'.

Moi set out to enter our documented history, and rather forcefully at that, by appearing in my GHC² text book as president and hero of the independence struggle. He appeared in my music class as we sang hymns in his praise and on the parade ground as we pledged our loyalties to him and his (*Nyayo*) philosophy of peace, love and unity. And Moi was always in the news. He made the news just by going to church, and because he was such a devout Christian, he was always in church and thus always in the news. Kenya was (is?) a Christian nation after all and in case that point was lost on you, he was always quick to remind you (that it was) in his public pronouncements. Kenya was a Christian nation, right? It is no small wonder then that morning parade at school was never complete without a reading from the Bible. In class they taught us from the Bible too: turn the other cheek and give unto Caesar what is Caesar's. So we grew up knowing that our duty was to pay taxes and look the other way as Caesar took away our land, our rights, our roads and our forests.

We were learning and learning well, just as the stooges at the Ministry of Education thought we would. After all they had read Karl Marx's rant

about religion being the opium of the people. Nevertheless, they wouldn't let us read Karl Marx and they told the politicians about the dangers of exposing our young and impressionable minds to Karl Marx and other subversive writers. The politicians hadn't read anything beyond their names on illegal Title Deeds, so they took to the podiums in sycophantic choruses begging the president to send that Karl Marx fellow to jail. Knowledge is power or so the cliché goes and therefore tyrannical governments the world over—from apartheid South Africa to the Moi regime in Kenya—introduced emasculating systems of education. In South Africa, their Bantu Education Model was meant to teach the black population how to be efficient slaves to their white masters. In Kenya, the 8-4-4 system of education taught us to be God-only-knows-what.

In school, they told us that literature was the mirror of society and then threw Shakespeare at us. Of course they couldn't let us glimpse at a mirror of our rotten society, so they taught us Shakespeare because they knew we couldn't understand, nay relate to it. It is no wonder then that upon leaving school you would be hard pressed to find a Kenyan who knew what the Shakespearean phrase, "*Oh Romeo, Oh Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo*" meant and the last literary text that the average grown-up Kenyan read was the Bible or a KCSE set book. The school system existed as a government tool for turning us into sycophants. Any literature that would mirror the 'short and brutish' life of the sycophant was outlawed. Unless, of course, it was set in a world that we couldn't understand. But sometimes they made mistakes (or maybe it was their graveyard humour) and taught us from the likes of Nikolai Gogol's *Government Inspector*. We kept reading and hoping they had made a mistake because a rotten system that helps you pour scorn on it is one that has scaled the evil hills beyond megalomania.

Then I left school. I left school and stumbled into a world where my university degree was worth less than the paper it was printed on. Suddenly I came to the realisation that I was a mere drop in that ocean that was the effluent of a conveyor belt system of education. A system that continued to pour more youth into a non-existent job market at the 8th level, or sometimes, at the fourth year after that. Those who were 'lucky' were spewed out after holding on for a further four years. And because poverty continued to spread its wings over our homes, more young people were dumped into the market at all manner of in-between levels as they dropped

out of school for lack of school fees. Or sometimes, to concentrate on the more urgent need of providing for their HIV/AIDS orphan siblings.

On leaving school, it dawned on me that the phrase 'education is the key' that my teachers had always hammered into me was as farcical and alienated from my time, space and reality as the Shakespearean and Biblical 'thou', 'wherefore' and whatnots. What was real to me was that I was an insignificant constituent of a significant demographic group—the dispossessed youth. Every year more and more of us kept trickling into the streets of Nairobi. The trickle quickly turned into a torrent until finally the river broke its banks. And, well, just like in the plains of Budalangi, that river had no dykes; the social fabric was ripped apart, the safety nets had been taken away, along with the roads...the human rights...the forests!

The youth were advised to join the *jua kali* (informal) sector. We were told to put into practice all the practical things that the 8-4-4 system had taught us. I remember wondering whether we were meant to form choirs to entertain the president on Moi Day. So we stored away our academic papers under our mattresses and with our toes peeping out through third-hand patent leather shoes, we hit the streets. We had now become 'The Tarmacking'. But River Road was full. Industrial Area—*Hakuna Kazi*. Kariobangi Light Industries, *Wapi!* Even the *muhindi* sweat shops and the EPZ Labour Camps, complaining that operating costs were too prohibitive, began to shut down. This was bizarre because they were notorious for using the Labour Law as a sex toy and the Minimum Wage as a spittoon.

And so there we were on the streets totally unable, unlike others, to describe ourselves in one word or neat phrase such as Lawyer, Banker, Political Thief or Bank Robber. On the streets we existed as mere statistics. The closest we came to acquiring unique identifiers was in police Occurrence Books—Idler, Suspect, *Mungiki* Adherent or Unidentified African Male. Sometimes, in election years specifically, we became 'The Youth' while in NGO literature we made token appearances as 'Unemployed Youth'. At some point NGOs began to refer to us as 'Marginalised Youth' but then the donor funds tended towards the Girl Child's agenda, so the Girl Child became the new Marginalised and we went back to being Unemployed Youth.

In the midst of all this, what no one cared to ask is who we were. Our place was not what we occupied in all objectivity but that which we were

deemed to occupy. And this was a vacuous place where hope did not linger long. Not since all the things that had been promised us such as jobs and leadership had lingered a lot longer than we thought they would in the hands of an aging minority. So we forgot the pursuit of Self Actualisation; Maslow's hierarchy of needs became to us nothing more than a chart with our names printed at the bottom in indelible ink. We became too preoccupied with satisfying the most primal of humanity's deficiency needs to worry about our status in society or to think about what we were to ourselves or to those that sat at the top of the food chain. While the world beyond us rolled on with its aspirations of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness, we resigned ourselves to fate. We grovelled, fought and killed each other just to stay alive.

And the truth of the matter is that if the national psyche were a democracy, then we—the dispossessed youth—by being the largest demographic group are the true epitome of Kenyan-ness. But then again this was Kenya and our version of democracy meant the tyranny of the minority—a minority who occasionally yielded power to its sons, brothers and wives every couple of years. And so the experience of we—the majority—went on unnoticed. We could never be contributors to the socio-economic or political landscape of this country, forget about defining its national character. So we shrank into our cocoons that remained undefined by us but only paid homage to by others in the crime pages: 'Public Alarmed by Rise in Violent Crime'; the token annual 'exclusive' newspaper report: 'The Child Sex Slaves of Malindi' or the faceless statistics of grant proposals: 'Two Million Youths Disenfranchised'.

Whatever others branded us, we couldn't stop long enough to discourse on identities; we had our pitiful existences to get through. So we spent all our lives chasing bread and butter and the occasional shot of alcohol to escape the pain of living a life *sans* a sense of self. We kept on with our futile striving, our furtive sex in disused phone booths, our dinners of stale bread and sugarless strong tea and every single day our hope sunk deeper and deeper into the stygian depths of the Nairobi River. Life is short and brutish as Thomas Hobbes would say but we have to keep it fed and clothed while it lasts.

Notes

¹ Follow the footsteps.

² Geography, History, Civics.

CHAPTER SIX

Performing Identity in Kiswahili Literature

Richard Makhanu Wafula

Introduction

Kiswahili Literature and Identity

This chapter intends to examine Kiswahili Literature within the broad rubric of identity politics. In the scholarly publications of Al-Amin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff Noor (1993) and Ali Mazrui and Al-Amin Mazrui (1995), there is an acknowledgement of the fluidity of Kiswahili literature, language and culture. Yet these scholars, perhaps constrained by the fact that they have not been fearless and articulate apologists of the community with which they sympathize, have also sometimes and in some curious way rather shyly attempted to cultivate a sense of the autonomy of the Swahili people and by extension, of their culture and literature.

In this chapter, I restate the fact that Kiswahili literature is thoroughly hybrid and even the most rigorous defender of a distinct Kiswahili literary identity often finds it impossible to deny or avoid this fluidity. In arguing this case, I agree with Stuart Hall (1996), Webner and Ranger (1996) and Michel Foucault (1999) when they point out that identity is neither essentialist nor reductionist; to the contrary it is in a constant process of movement, interaction and intertextuality. Kiswahili literature, language and culture best exemplifies this cultural and textual mix, reworking and reconstitution. Swahili identity has an intercultural heritage which continues to be multicultural. The entire gamut of Kiswahili studies is too broad for our purposes at the moment. I shall therefore, concentrate on three elements of Kiswahili literary identity to make the case for the hybridity of Kiswahili literature. First, I examine the fluid nature of Kiswahili identity, the various defining characteristics of Kiswahili literature and finally focus on several genres of Kiswahili literature with a view to demonstrating that that literature is inherently hybrid and essentially multicultural.

The Fluid Nature of Swahili Identity

From the writing of Ali Mazrui (1964) Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff (1996) and Al- Amin Mazrui (2007), Swahili identity is fluid. But it appears that the specific ways Mazrui and Shariff redefine this fluidity in their book *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* is in terms of a pyramid tending towards an ethnic Swahili essentialism. This, as this analysis shows, is misleading. Long before Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff wrote *The Swahili: Idiom and the Identity of an African people*, Ali Mazrui spoke about the Swahili ethnic identity. Ali Mazrui (1964) asserted:

If the white citizens of the United States had been Arab, most of the coloured citizens would have become Arab too. It has been estimated that over seventy per cent of the Negro population in the United States has some “white” blood. And the “white” blood was much more often than not derived from a white father. Now given the principle that if the father is Arab the child is Arab, most Negroes of the United States would have been Arab had the white people of the United States been Arab too. White Americans are Caucasian and the dominant culture is Germanic. And so if either of the parents is non-Germanic, the offspring cannot be Germanic either (22).

Although Ali Mazrui is speaking about Arabs in this text, his argument is applicable to the ethnic Swahili as well. When Alamin Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff speak about Swahili identity, they bear this out clearly. They see the overriding characteristics of Arabocentrism and Afrocentrism to be identical. Ali Mazrui’s view quoted above is a patriarchal but basically liberal attitude of racial and ethnic identity. In essence, Mazrui is saying that anyone can be a Swahili by ethnic description if they meet the patriarchal criterion. Ali Mazrui does not, however, define this identity economically and politically. That seems to account for his liberal stance with regards to who a Mswahili can be. Almost thirty years after Ali Mazrui’s statement on the racial liberalism of the Swahili, Alamin Mazrui (1992) had this to say:

European languages may be acquired by all and sundry; but when it comes to linguistic definitions of European ethnicity, European languages have failed to neutralize genetic boundaries. African languages on the other hand, defy genetic boundaries in their contribution of ethnic identities...had the American *lingua franca* been Swahili, for example, instead of English, the entire African American population that for

generations has been speaking English as a first and often only language, would have been ethnically Swahili (76).

The above is a very liberal approach to ethnic identity based on linguistics. In Alamin Mazrui's words, linguistic homogeneity can lead to racial, ethnic and other forms of homogeneity among Africans. By the same token and conversely, Al-Amin Mazrui attests to the unyielding, hybrid and multicultural character of the Swahili identity.

Towards Defining the Literature

The definition of Kiswahili literature like the definition of African literature in general is problematic to any researcher whose aim is to pigeon-hole it within a narrow and fixed conceptual framework. Owing to the various sources of culture from which the literature has come and been created, different stakeholders in this literary confluence take what serves their interests. And these interests are so passionate that they cannot be wished away without jeopardizing some constituting elements of the stakeholders.

Among the definitions that have been advanced by scholars (Wamitila, 2003) the following appear to recur:

1. Kiswahili literature are the narratives and writings of people who refer to themselves as Waswahili ethnically.
2. The literature of inhabitants of East and central Africa who use Kiswahili as their medium of expression.
3. The literature created by a person of any nation or race who uses Kiswahili and is able to articulate significant issues that affect the lives of East Africans.
4. Any work of art that has been translated into Kiswahili.

All the definitions listed above are valid depending on the institutional and social contexts with which the literature is associated. Of the four, the fourth would appear to most readers to be most objectionable especially by essentialist or reductionist standards because of its accommodation of translated works into the corpus of Kiswahili literature. A rudimentary examination of the literary history of Kiswahili literature, however, leads to the revelation that the first canonized literary works in Kiswahili are actually translated. *Utenzi wa Hamziya* perhaps represents the most

interesting dialectic in Kiswahili literature. On the one hand, it uses Kingozi, the oldest variety of Kiswahili. It is also the first known translation into Kiswahili. This makes it original in a direct and immediate way due to the fact that whoever would like to access the oldest Kiswahili dialect cannot avoid reading *Utenzi wa Hamziya*. On the other hand, the work is a translation of an Arabic poem entitled *Kasidatul Hamziya* composed by Muhammed bin Said al-Busiry from Egypt (Kezilahabi, 1983). It is not surprising then that over the years, artists both indigenous and non-indigenous Swahili, have often borrowed and freely appropriated motifs of their literary works from elsewhere. This applies to all the major literary genres of the literature.

The Novel

Shaaban Robert is probably the most famous Swahili poet. He was also a prolific author of several prose works most of which were composed in an allegorical mode. In *Adili na Nduguze*, *Kufikirika*, *Kusadikika* and *Siku ya Watenzi Wote*, Shaaban Robert is obviously in dialogue with adjacent cultures and spaces both thematically and stylistically. Apart from his African background which refurbishes his work with proverbs, idioms and axioms found in his home environment, Shaaban Robert is well conversant with and appropriates the oriental folk traditions to his local purpose. It is true that the motifs of jealousy, of the younger brother who is hated and harassed by the two older brothers and of the redeeming quality of the virtue of love have a universal touch. This notwithstanding, the motif of the two older jealousy brothers in *Adili na Nduguze* and the controlling motif of 'Kisa cha Mzee wa Pili na Mbwa Wawili Weusi' found in the *Arabian Nights* have striking resemblances. Shaaban Robert clearly takes the storyline of the Arabian Knight narrative the way it is and renders it into Kiswahili. At any rate, the East Coast of Africa has had such a long contact with the oriental world that a cultural intertextuality would be expected and only remotely be regarded as foreign.

Kusadikika has perhaps more parallels with some stories in the *Alfu Lela Ulela* series than *Adili na Nduguze*. Just as there are seven messengers of *Kusadikika* (including Karama), Sindbad the sailor makes seven voyages to various parts of the cosmos. The journeys that the messengers of *Kusadikika* and Sindbad make are cumulative in the sense that the experiences that the protagonists go through enable them to make holistic

moral statements with regard to their lives. By the time Shaaban Robert was composing his romances, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* had been already translated into Kiswahili. The travels that Gulliver undertakes are fundamentally similar with what the various messengers of Kusadikika undergo. They also have similar cumulative consequences.

That Shaaban Robert's multiculturalism is not an isolated case but a central element of the Kiswahili literary tradition is shown in the novels of Muhammad Said Abdullah. Like his slightly older compatriot, Abdullah attended the Islamic *madrasa* and the Christian missionary school. This blend of a secular Islamic life with Western values is shown in the life of Abdullah's principal character, Msa. The most pervasive influence in Abdullah's work is from the American writer of mystery and crime narratives, Conan A. Doyle. Abdullah's novels such as *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale* (1957), *Kisima cha Giningi* (1968), *Duniani Kuna Watu* (1973), *Siri ya Sifuri* (1974) and *Mwana wa Yungi Hulewa* (1976) adopt Doyle's characters and place them in a Zanzibar setting. Msa and Najum are to Abdullah what Sherlock Holmes and Watson are to Conan Doyle. Besides adopting Conan's archetypal characters, Abdullah takes Conan's narrative plots including the attempt to describe the mystery tale in a simple and straightforward way for the faster and easier comprehension of characters whose capacity for connecting complicated episodes is limited.

Abdullah had been criticized for unabashedly transferring narrative plots of an American writer to an African environment. However, the rich Kiswahili linguistic facility with which he is endowed makes the reading of his works irresistibly appealing. Moreover, the themes that Abdullah explores such as murders associated with inheritance of property and attempts to debunk superstitious beliefs through the use of sound logical practices is in harmony with an African setting.

Much later in the literary history of Kiswahili prose, there emerge artists who use the realistic method to weave their stories as if this method evolved and developed naturally in their home environments. *Rosa Mistika*, *Utengano*, *Ukiwa*, *Tumaini*, *Kufa Kuzikana*, *Haini* and *Maisha Kitendawili* are some of the readings in Kiswahili prose that do not make apologies as to their realism. In the midst of this array of realistic novels, some writers have begun composing what has come to be called magical or marvelous realism. Magical realism was originally associated with writers from Latin

America like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and Vargas Llosa. One of the defining characteristics of magical realism is that what is sometimes regarded as fantastic, unreal and unlikely to happen is in fact realistic and occurs frequently in the lives of ordinary mortals. Contemporary Kiswahili authors namely, Said Ahmed Mohamed and Wadi Kyalo Wamitila have blended their local sense of magical realism with the Latin American version to create *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Bin-Adamu!* respectively.

The foregoing observation shows that there are multivalent artistic currents underlying Kiswahili culture in general and the Kiswahili novel in particular. By multivalent currents in a literature, I mean the capacity of that literature to be of use at various institutional levels in a specific community. In most communities all over the world, oral and written literatures exist concurrently and perform dissimilar or similar functions depending on whether their focus is eye-bound or ear-bound. Similarly, Kiswahili artists, whether ethnically defined or not, use various literary modes to communicate their experiences in view of the pressures imposed upon them both as members of their local communities and as members of the wider international community that uses Kiswahili as a *lingua franca*.

Drama

Ebrahim Hussein does not specifically describe what a Swahili person by ethnic description would conceive of a play. In his essay 'Hatua Mbalimbali za Kubuni na Kutunga Tamthiliya Kufuatana na Misingi ya Ki-Aristotle' (1983) published in *Makala Za Semina ya Kimataifa ya Waandishi wa Kiswahili III* (194–202), he describes the Swahili play according to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Finally he writes:

Kuandika tamthiliya kwa kufuata misingi aliyoweka Aristotle ni njia moja kuu ya kuandika tamthiliya. Lakini si njia pekee. Na kwa kweli mila ya Kiafrika haiowani uzuri na usanifu huu... Ikiwa mwandishi atatumia misingi ya Aristotle au baadhi ya misingi hiyo jambo muhimu ni kuweka akilini kwamba misingi hii si sheria. Ila ni vipengele vya tamthiliya. Sheria kama ipo ni moja tu: kujua nini watu wanapenda kuona jukwaani na nini hawapendi kuona na kusikia jukwaani (202).

Translation: Writing a play by following the rules laid down by Aristotle is one major way of composing plays. But it is not by any measure the

only way of doing so. In practice, African traditions do not blend very well with this (Aristotelian) format. If a writer will use this format, or part of it, the important point to keep in mind is that the Aristotelian foundations are not immutable laws. They are just aspects of the play. If there is any rule about composing drama, it is just one: to know what people want to see and hear on the stage.

Hussein uses a liberal approach in defining the play, an approach that is not tied to any specific African ethnic identity. Underlying Hussein's critique of Aristotle's *Poetics*, there is an assumption that a fairly relative homogeneity in the production of indigenous African theatrical forms exists. By the time Hussein gave this guideline for play construction, western schooling and other currents of theatrical practice had already influenced his idea of theatre and drama. Hussein's idea is not based on any specific "Uswahili" or Africanness. It is based on indigenous African dramatic forms in general. Furthermore, his is not an isolated case. Benedict Symbo and Alamin Mazrui (1992) have said the following on Swahili drama before and after the colonial period:

Kwa uchache tunaweza kusema kwamba muhula huu (wa ukoloni) ulituletea mbegu mpya ya fasihi, ambayo kwa kuingiliana na zile zilizokuwepo za fasihi-simulizi, ilikuja kuipa tamthilia ya Kiswahili sura yake maalum. Wazo hili la tamthilia lililotokana na mchanganyiko wa mbegu za kienyeji na mbegu za kigeni baadaye lilichukuliwa na wenyeji likawekwa jukwaani (91).

Translation: In brief, we can say that the colonial period brought us new traits of literature. By blending these traits with the indigenous ones that emanated from oral literature, the Swahili play was given a new special form. The product of this mix was taken by indigenous people and put on the stage.

There is no direct reference to a marginalised Swahili identity in this passage. In fact, Symbo and Mazrui are likely referring to the entire literary ethos that grew out of the meeting of Western theatrical genres and African ones. If the question of the identity of a specific literary form had been at the back of their mind, they would have shown the indigenous components of modern Swahili drama. They would, for instance, have attempted to demonstrate how a particular and distinct indigenous theatre has contributed in a large measure to the emergence of modern Swahili drama or drama written in Swahili.

Some ethnic Swahili scholars have not seen the need to seek definitions of modern Swahili drama based on the Swahili indigenous theatrical types. A case in point is Said Ahmed Mohamed (1995). Mohamed has a 'universal' notion of a play rather than a narrow, ethnically based one. In his description of the meaning of drama (59) he quotes A.J. Cuddon's *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, adopts its meaning, and applies it as the standard definition of drama throughout. Mohamed's identification and description of the elements of drama in Swahili is not any different from elements of the realistic or well-made European play.

Whatever his reasons for doing this, it seems to me that Mohamed is more concerned with the fact that Kiswahili is able to communicate complex concepts including those that are found in standard dictionaries of literary terms. Moreover, it appears to me that Mohamed is concerned with drama in Swahili rather than drama that is composed by people who are ethnically defined as Swahili. Like Mazrui and Syambo referred to earlier, Mohamed is not bothered by the way Swahili traditions or other African traditions have modified the present structure of the Swahili play. The fact is that most critics of Kiswahili drama take for granted the meaning and practice of Kiswahili drama as an art form. In so doing, they concur with Mazrui and Ibrahim Shariff Noor (1996) when they assert with regard to Kiswahili literature in general:

This literature is heterogenous ethnically, nationally, religiously and ideologically. It is transethnic and transnational literature whose only binding force is a Swahili language that although differentiated, tends to revolve around the standard norm. Swahili as well as non Swahili, Tanzanian as well as non-Tanzanian, Muslim as well as non-Muslim authors have all participated in, and contributed to the creation of this literature (91).

The above quote clearly demonstrates that Kiswahili literature is heterogenous but can also be used as an agent of homogenizing distinct groups of people.

Poetry

The fact that East Africa's coastal strip is renown for having had a longer period than any other part of East Africa in the composition of prosodic verse does not mean that it is its (the Coast's) exclusive preserve or that it

originated there. Neither has it kept a single immutable format since its creation. The following statement is erroneously meant to illustrate to some degree the essentialism of Kiswahili identity when it comes to poetic genres:

Between 1981 and 1982, one of the present authors, Alamin Mazrui, had the opportunity to teach courses in Swahili literature at Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi in Kenya. In the field of poetry, studied were written verse composed both in prosodic and free verse. And, indeed invariably, the students found the diction of prosodic verse less penetrable than that of free verse...For second or third speakers, "*the unassimilated Arabism*" seemed to be at the top of the hierarchy of linguistic impenetrability, followed by "*archaisms*" that were in turn followed by lexical contractions. In general, however, once students had the opportunity to fathom the meaning of specific lexical items they found problematic, the poem became immediately accessible. They seemed to experience no problem in appreciating and dealing with the metaphor used in many a prosodic verse (128)

Mazrui misses the actual reason that led to this situation. The language that was taught in schools in both Kenya and Tanzania was the Standard variety based on the Unga dialect. Had the standard dialect been Kimvita and Kiamu, the problem that Mazrui sees may not have existed, or may have been very minimal. Up-country students did not have a natural ease with free verse either. Much of it was written in the Standard dialect with which they were familiar. This does not mean that they were naturally predisposed to know, understand and appreciate free verse. Neither were they naturally predisposed to communicate in Standard Swahili. The students (of whom I was one¹) had successfully sat difficult Swahili exams in High School. They therefore had a mastery of Standard Swahili, the variety of Swahili that was used to compose much of the free verse. As Mazrui and Shariff themselves point out, free verse was almost an exclusive preserve of upcountry poets, who were also users of the Standard variety of Swahili. The Standard variety is also the language which up-country poets learned at school.

This is unlike most ethnic Swahili people, who may learn the Standard in addition to their local variety of Swahili. Ethnic Waamu speak Kiamu. They have to go to school to master the conventionally acceptable nuances of Standard Swahili, which is based on the Unga dialect. To ignore the institutional domains in which the various varieties of Swahili are used in East Africa is to fall back on a needless and false essentialism, namely, that

most up-country poets knew the Standard Swahili as if it was their first language or mother tongue.

In saying that his Swahili students from up-country could not, at least at the outset, grasp the archaisms and arabisms of Swahili prosodic verse, Mazrui also fails to recognise the entire socio-linguistic situation and institutional structure that helped to nurture a greater appreciation of free verse over conventional Swahili poetry. Therefore, as pointed out earlier, just as the scripted play is a hybrid product, the Swahili poem is similarly hybrid. In their description of the historical development of Swahili poetry, Symbo and Mazrui (44) point out that Swahili verse has influences of Arabic and Persian poetry. On the Swahili play Mazrui and Shariff write:

The British colonial influence also prompted the extension of the Swahili *ngano* (story) to the novel, the Swahili *tungo / mashairi ya kujibizana* (dramatized performances of dialogue poetry) perhaps to the play, and the Swahili *tungo / mashairi* to free verse. Having so grown, Swahili language literature became increasingly trans-Swahili in terms of the ethnic background of its authors, the nature of its themes, the multiplicity of its genres as well as its Swahili dialects of composition (94).

In the same way as Mazrui and Shariff view Swahili as a language that traverses many spaces, they may have to think about an identity that goes beyond or that includes ethnicity. Researches such as *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger) and *Imagined Communities* (Benedict Anderson) enrich the Swahili literary scholar's appreciation of the multiculturalism of Kiswahili literary identity. In my view, the fear that the extension of Swahili genres dilutes or endangers the survival of Swahili identity as is sometimes alluded to is misplaced. Ethnic Swahili people can continue practicing their more "authentic" culture and art in juxtaposition with the emerging Swahili communities that are appropriating various elements of older versions of Swahili culture. They could also exploit emerging identities based on the wider Swahili linguistic ethos to their advantage. There are probably more modern novels in Swahili by ethnic Swahili writers than non-ethnic Swahili writers.

Examples From Kiswahili Drama

Ethnic Swahili dramatists do not take a narrow view of the creative works they engage in. They have used motifs from the Swahili culture and

elsewhere without raising the ethnic issues in a reductionist way. The motif of exorcism in *Mashetani*, *Pungwa*, and the narrative motifs in *Kivuli Kinaishi* and *Jogoo Kijijini* are typically Swahili in character but do not explore specifically Swahili ethnic themes. Ethnic Swahili dramatists have also written plays within other traditions. *Kwenye Ukingo wa Thim* (Hussein), *Amezidi* (Mohamed), and Mazrui's *Shadows of the Moon* have trans-local resonances.

Shadows of the Moon by Alamin Mazrui is a typical example of plays written by ethnic Swahili dramatists. The play is set in the state of Lindi, which has just attained its independence. Initially, independence is received with enthusiasm, hope and high expectations. Citizens of the new state hope for great prosperity as they usher in a new government. However, the head of state (a founding father) forces the citizens to deify him. As the action of the play rises to a crescendo, underpaid workers begin to threaten industrial action. The playwright makes it clear that workers are exploited because the factories in which they work are owned by former colonial masters. Consequently, workers have resolved to depose the government and end exploitation despite the obstacles that stand in their way.

Mazrui's play is an exemplary example of post-independence African literature. This literature is born of anger directed at post-colonial African governments for failing to economically empower their citizens. *Shadows of the Moon* depicts the disparity between pre-independence hopes and post-uhuru frustrations. Although the play is written in English and uses motifs from European and American cultural experiences to develop its themes, it borrows heavily from African cultures as well.² In other words, the play borrows sayings of the wise from wherever it can to develop its themes.

Apart from employing epigraphs from western literature, Mazrui couches the main conflict of the play in Marxist terms. He pits capital against labour and develops his characters as members of distinctive economic classes in Marxist terms. While I am not suggesting that it is wrong for an ethnic Swahili dramatist to use ideas that originate elsewhere to empower and liberate his people, it is clear in this instance that Mazrui does not use the Swahili ethnic community as a microcosm to highlight the broader economic conflicts that exist in East African societies and

beyond. Were the ethnic Swahili question foregrounded or even alluded to in the play, one would make a link between the arguments raised in *The Swahili* and the performance of *Shadows of the Moon*. These works were published almost at the same time and one is thus bound to seek connections between them.

If there is any specific Swahili ethnic identity, it is not clearly expressed in *Shadows of the Moon*, let alone other dramatic works by ethnic Swahili dramatists. The latter part of *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* by Mazrui and Shariff expresses the baffling view that Swahili ethnicity is constructing and mobilizing itself around a radicalized brand of Islam. This does not find expression in any dramatic work. All along, the reader of *The Swahili* is given to understand that Swahili identity is fluid and heterogeneous. Then, towards the end of the book, we are shown a homogeneity coalescing around religious identity. Perhaps in time, works by ethnic Swahili artists that mobilize the ethnic Swahili people's resources around religious fervour may begin to appear. However, the current situation is that ethnic Swahili dramatists are working in Swahili language just as any other East African dramatist, who is not a Mswahili by ethnicity.

Conclusion

Ethnic Swahili intellectuals are ambivalent as far as the question of a Swahili ethnic identity is concerned. On some occasions, they embrace a broader view of ethnic identity. This is exemplified in some scholars' use of Swahili linguistic identity as the base for determining other types of identity. This is evident when one considers similar types of identity formations, especially with regard to black Americans. On the other hand, there is a tendency on the part of the same scholars to define Swahili identity in restrictive terms when they contextualize that identity within East Africa. This use of double standards is problematic. But it also shows how complex an issue the definition of Swahili identity is. Ethnic Swahili artists are not particularly enthusiastic about exploring specifically Swahili ethnic themes in their literary works, the foregoing observation notwithstanding. They practice various literary genres, just as any other artist from East Africa and beyond would, taking from elsewhere what serves them best. This makes the performance of identity in Kiswahili literature quintessentially multicultural and hybrid.

Notes

¹ Mazrui taught me Swahili literature at Kenyatta University in the academic year 1981/1982. This was just before the Moi government detained him in July 1982. At this time, debates about Swahili prosodic verse and free verse were raging in Swahili studies in Kenya and Tanzania. E. Kezilahabi had published an anthology of free verse, *Kichomi* (1974) whose contents could not be analyzed using the criteria of prosodic verse.

² The epigraphs of the play are quoted from Byron, Herbert Marcuse, a Swahili saying and Thomas Jefferson. They all relate to the empowerment of the weak.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Culture, Religion and Identity

Mary N. Getui

Culture, religion and identity, which are the concern of this article, are three separate entities which are loaded, and at the same time intertwined, interlocked and interlinked in a complex way.

The approach taken gives an overview of what culture entails, then proceeds to provide the same on religion. The implications for and on identity are then discussed. The discussion focuses on the situation in Kenya, borrowing mainly from African culture / religion and Christianity; but the ideas could apply elsewhere, as the underlying principles are essentially the same.

Culture

Shorter (1998: 23) has indicated that there are 164 definitions of culture. The variations in these definitions are not that distinct. They all focus on culture as being a people's way of life, in its entirety. To highlight on what comprises culture, we turn to what Mugambi (1989: 129–131) calls pillars or components of culture. These are politics, economics, ethics, aesthetics, (symmetric, sonics, chromatics, graphics), metaphysics, theoretical tools (logics) and practical tools (machines). An elaboration on what each of these components entails follows below:

- Politics has to do with mechanisms and patterns of decision making, as well as patterns of exerting social influence. Communities put in place means of determining the leaders and the followers, the teachers and the learners, the choosers and the chosen. These mechanisms could be written or commonly accepted through custom, written in the hearts as it were.
- Economics incorporates—like politics—mechanisms and patterns of owning, utilizing, producing, distributing, transferring and inheriting of resources such as land, water and food; and all those other resources that are available in the given context.

- Ethics are based on conduct, behaviour and values that govern relationships in society with regard to the moral stance.
- Aesthetics is basically founded on the sense of beauty in association with symmetrics (size, shape, sound) chromatics (colour) graphics (line drawing and sketching).
- Metaphysics is that set of beliefs concerning the ultimate nature of reality, which includes the world view and religion.
- Theoretical tools or logics is what society constructs as tools of analysis to assist in coping with concepts.
- Practical tools refers to the machines manufactured in order to facilitate the accomplishment of intended tasks. These machines are designed on the basis of the other components of culture highlighted above.

As we highlight on religion, an aspect of metaphysics, we emphasize Mugambi's assertion (130–1) that:

...beliefs are a super structure presupposed while all other values and judgments are being cultivated. When the world-view changes, even slightly, the rest of the value system must also be adjusted accordingly.

Religion

From the highlight above on the components of culture, it is distinct that religion occupies a significant place. Just like culture, religion also has many definitions. We will take Gyekye's (1997: 3) definition.

Religion (is) the awareness of the existence of some Ultimate, Supreme Being who is the origin and sustainer of this universe...

There are many religions in the world. Smart (1969) outlines some of these using a geographical basis as follows: *Primitive religions which comprise prehistoric and primitive religions*. Among these are:

- a) religions of India namely verdict religion, Jainism, the Buddha, the Upanishads, early Buddhism, classical Hinduism.
- b) religions of the Far East (China and Japan) which are Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto and Buddhism (in Japan).

- c) religions of the Near East, which are Egyptian Religion, Mesopotamia Religion, Persian Zoroastrianism, Greek Religion and Roman Religion, as well as the Jewish experience, the early Christian experience, the Muslim experience, the latter Christian experience, and contemporary religions' experience.

In a later publication, Smart (1989), perhaps to get away from the controversy surrounding the connotation and implications of the term primitive, and to be more encompassing on world religions, he gives a timeline and still maintains a geographical approach. He lists these religions under the following titles—Earliest Religion, South Asia, China, Japan, South East Asia, The Pacific, The America, The Ancient Near East, Persia and Central Asia, The Greek and Roman World, Classical and Medieval Islam, Classical African Religions, The Explosion of Europe and the Reforming of Christianity, North America, South Asia and Reactions to Colonial Intervention, China and Korea in Modern Times, Modern Southeast Asia, Japan in Modern Times, Islam Passes Through the Shadows, the Colonial Impact in the Pacific, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Africa in the Modern World, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Reflections on the 20th century.

At the onset of the 21st century, if Smart were alive he would probably widen his scope to incorporate further reflection on the issues he raises for the various regions and much more on the issues that were of concern to him at the close of the 20th century namely the Unity of Religion, Diasporas in the Modern World and Worldview Analysis and Plural Societies.

Smart (1969: 31–2) also aptly notes on these religions,

For we are not confronted in fact by some monolithic object, namely religion. We are confronted by religions. And each religion has its own style, its own inner dynamic, its own special meanings, its uniqueness. Each religion is an organism, and has to be understood in terms of the interrelation of its different parts. Thus, though there are resemblances between religions or between parts of religions, these must not be seen too crudely.

Kenya has many religions some of which Smart has referred to. These include African religion(s) as practiced by the various ethnic groups. Christianity is another major religion that includes the so-called mainline

or mainstream churches, the African Instituted/Initiated Independent Churches (A.I.C.s), the pentecostal and charismatic groups. Other religions include Islam with the two main wings of Sunni and Sufi; Oriental religions such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. Not to be forgotten are the new religious movements, which cannot be said to be the claim of or solely associated with any of the above broad categories.

Mugambi and Getui (2004) have outlined the religious scenes in Eastern Africa as including the following:

African (world) Religion, Christianity—mainline Christian Churches and the related dynamism, AICs, emerging religious movements, Muslim diversities, the Bahai Faith, Unification Church, Arya Samaj, Hare Krshna Movement, and secularism and emerging religious movements.

In an attempt to capture religion as a major player in the components and expression of culture, we consider it appropriate to highlight the seven dimensions of religion as given by Smart (1969: 15–25; 1989: 12–21). These are the practical and ritual, the narrative and mythic, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional, the experiential and emotional and the material. A religion may have all or most of these and the emphasis of which dimension(s) for each religion may differ.

Practices or rituals in religion can be elaborate or simple acts, performed in a particular or special place or time. They have an inner and outer component on the part of the performer. The inner is not explicit to the outsider or observer. The focus of the act is contact with ‘The Other’ who is commonly referred to in some of the religions as God. One who performs a ritual “attains higher status of consciousness”.

The narrative and myth dimension incorporates a people’s recognition and appreciation of the significant historical events to which they attribute their origins, values, beliefs and practices. These are not to be analyzed for logic or truth. They have been passed down generations and are held as true and binding, regardless of the lack of coherency and even consistency.

Doctrines are systems or structured beliefs that are key for a religious tradition. They are developed over a period of time. The ethical and legal dimension is concerned with the conduct, ethical behaviour and moral

stand of individuals. The code of ethics of the dominant religion often controls the community.

Religions are organizations that have an institutional, communal and social significance. Religions and ethical ideas relate closely to the existing social conditions and attitudes, emanating in the social and institutional dimension of religion. Certain individuals may stand out because of their special or sacred skills, knowledge or experience.

The experiential and emotional dimension is that which is centred on the individual's experience with the 'Other'. This aspect is rather intricate as it is personal and personalized as it were, received or experienced through visions or conversion. The experience brings about calmness, peace and dynamism. Other people will rely on the individual's account of their personal mystique and mystical encounter, since they are not privy to this encounter. The experiential or emotional dimension is not a reserve of the founders of religions but can be for the adherents as well.

The other important dimension is the material, portrayed through physical features such as buildings, art and special sites. These features are regarded as manifesting the Sacred.

The vibrant religious scenario in Kenya has already been alluded to. While we recognize that this scenario is challenged by many aspects that are indifferent to or anti-religion, there are certain assumptions that we can safely make.

For example, despite the infiltration and presence of new religions in Africa, many of her peoples are still governed by the indigenous belief systems, albeit remotely or unconsciously. This is particularly so for those in the rural areas, or those with family ties there and also the older urbanized folk.

This is summed up by Gyekye (1997: 4) as follows:

In African life and thought the religious is not distinguished from the nonreligious, the sacred from the secular, the spiritual from the material. In all undertakings—whether it be cultivating, sowing, harvesting, eating, and traveling—religion is at work. To be born into the African society is to be born into a culture that is intensely and pervasively religious...

Gyekye (3) further continues:

Religion ... influences in a comprehensive way, the thoughts and actions of African people. Religion enters all aspects of life so fully —determining practically, every aspect of life.

On the same note Mbiti (1969: 1) says:

Africans are notoriously religious... Religion permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible to isolate it.

This is further supported by Magesa (1997: 16–7) who observes:

...Christianity has succeeded in gaining large numbers of converts. Yet insofar as Africa and Africans themselves are concerned, this suppression has truly been minimal, more apparent than real.... The moral perspectives of African religion are essentially alive throughout the continent... Indeed, African religious perspectives persist despite the odds against them, and they serve a positive purpose.

These sentiments may not be true for the new religions, but African religion does prevail and would challenge these new religions or be in competition with them. What can be concluded regarding religion, especially for Africa, is that it is a core aspect in the day to day lives of the people—either through practice, heritage or association. Gyekeye (4–5) echoes similar sentiments when he says:

Each community has its own system of religious beliefs and practice... each religions system is limited to the people from whom that particular system emerged and who practice that system from generation to generation.

On the same note, Smart (1969: 31) acknowledges that:

...Each religion has its own style, its own inner dynamics, its own special meanings, its uniqueness.

What emerges from this analysis of religion is that it is a major and central component of culture.

The Link Between Culture, Religion and Identity

As earlier mentioned, identity just like culture and religion, is not easy to define. In an attempt to convey what identity is we consider it associated

with and connected with the following culture and religion linked questions or concerns.

Who am I? What is my value, my uniqueness? Where did I come from; who is responsible for my being? What is my purpose? What is my destiny? Who and what is around me—what do these owe me and what do I owe them? Are they of any value to me?

How do culture and religion respond to the above identity-related questions/concerns?

With regard to the question who am I, what we gather in relation to culture and religion is that the individual is an entity within a particular context, a cultural milieu. All the components of culture and the dimensions of religion come in for this question because the individual and the individual's life are connected with and linked to the components of culture and the dimension of religion. The more direct ones, however, are the metaphysical pillar and the mythological dimension which explain and attribute human and cosmic origin, source of life and creation to a Supreme Being. This is not the preserve of a single religion. For example, African communities have their myths of origin. The Genesis account in the Bible serves the same purpose for Christianity. The cultural and religious tradition one belongs to do assist in the identity search or placement by providing or leading to a belief system. While this may be collective or general for a community or religions tradition, the individual has a stake in it. The bottom line is that the individual is created by God.

On the question of what is one's value or what is one's uniqueness, again the culture milieu and the religions tradition have a place for the individual. In the African cultural and religious set-up the individual is significant. Gyekye's (1997: 47–51) ideas can be summed up as follows:

The individual is real and has his or her own individuality. Individual effort is a necessary condition for fulfilling individual needs and attaining own goals. The individual is responsible for the life he or she fashion for himself or herself. Self reliance and personal responsibility are significant as are personal initiative and the assets of individual unique talents and qualities.

It is along the same lines that we can bring in the aspect of bestowing names. In the African set up, one's name is religiously loaded. The name

says something or many things about the individual. The Abagusii of western Kenya name after those that have died. The bearer of the name signifies the continuity of the life of the departed one. However, for one to be named they have to portray a morally upright life. And the one named will be challenged to live up to and to maintain the good record and the exemplary standards of the name they bear. These names also manifest the history of the Gusii people. They depict the earlier experiences of the people such as their migration and major events in their life journey.

In an earlier article (Getui, 1996) the significance of names in the African context is discussed at length; that the name depicts the circumstances of birth, the history of the people, continuity of the lineage, desires of the family or society. Who gives the name, the ceremonies or rituals that mark this important event, when and how one can add a new name are significant considerations in many African communities. The name is, therefore, an important symbol of identity and should be given due consideration. For example, when and how it is given contributes towards challenging the individual to live up to societal expectations, and has value for the days ahead.

What is clear then is that the cultural set-up determines on bestowing the name, an important loaded and symbolic identity tag of the individual. The other rites of passage, namely birth initiation, marriage and death have significant identity symbolism. If they are not properly conducted, the individual is not considered complete.

In some Christian circles, the name is bestowed in a special solemn ceremony of baptism. The name is carefully chosen because the bearer and the bestower expect the bearer to be proud of it and to honour it. The question, where did I come from and who is responsible for my being has partly been answered. It is the Creator. The biological parents and others who provide social and other nurtures are just instruments or vessels whom the Creator uses. This is well exemplified in many sayings, which imply that the children do not solely owe their being to the human process of procreation. The children come through human beings but they are not from them.

Of notable significance is that the Creator is concerned and caters for the well-being and welfare of the individual. The Akan express this thus:

"God pounds the one armed person's 'fufu' for him. God drives away the insects from the tailless animal" (Gyekye, 1997: 10).

Gyekye elaborates more on this aspect of nurture and provision for the individual when he says that God's providence for his people is believed to be complete, indiscriminate, unrelenting, unfailing and constant. In a way also, the purpose of one's being is implied in what we have covered on the place of the individual. But we might add that one of the requirements on the individual in all cultures and religions is that the individual be a 'good person'.

A good person is one who lives well with self and others. This is well-provided for in the philosophical and doctrinal, and ethical and legal dimensions of religion. From the African and general cultural set up Gyekye (17–8) enriches this when he says:

...religion necessarily has an important role to play also in the moral life of the African people, as indeed in the moral lives of the people of many other cultures. Religion provides sanctions for the moral obligations and responsibility of the members of the community...misfortunes suffered by individuals or groups could be punishments for unethical behaviour, but they could also be warnings that people ought closely to examine their moral behaviour. The warnings embody moral rules and accepted norms of conduct...

The destiny of the individual, another critical concern of identity, is also addressed through culture and religion. Many African belief systems hold that ideally death, at whatever age or stage is not an end, but rather a translation of existence into another realm. The kind of life one leads and the nature of death and the accompanying rituals have a strong bearing on 'destiny'. For example, a long life and successful and faithful observation and fulfilment of consequent death rituals guarantee peace for the bereaved and the living in general and for the deceased as well. Christianity teaches on eschatology. Indeed the whole concept of salvation is destiny centred. What comes after death, has a link to, and is a consequence of the life lived. We have already discussed that the positive life is what qualifies one to be named. In the Catholic tradition, those who have led exemplary lives qualify to be saints. What is noted then, is that the identity of a person is not just how they have lived but the implications this life has for this individual and for others.

This now leads us to the questions that have got to do with the identity of a person in relation to others. In the African social set-up, community is paramount. This is well expressed by Mbiti (1969: 108–9) when he notes that:

Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am”. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view.

This famous maxim is elaborated on by Gyekye (35–51) who affirms that in the African society, communal values are emphasized. These are values that express appreciation of the worth and importance of the community, they underpin and guide on the type of social relations, attitudes and behaviours, values, interest and goals that ought to exist between individuals who live together in a community sharing a social life and with a sense of common goals, understandings, obligations, loyalty, commitment, willingness and interdependence. Community is not necessarily biologically determined, but rather that the people share an overall way of life. Emphasis is on activity, participation and the success of the wider society. The social dimension of religion finds credence here. Christianity, as already noted, has many arms and these are growing, given the rapid growth of new religions movements in Africa and Kenya in particular.

The individual finds identity in the religious tradition that one belongs to, be it a denomination, a parish, a prayer cell or a Small Christian Community. A few maxims to assist in emphasizing these points include what Gyekye (1997: 37) says:

The left arm washes the right arm and the right arm washes the left arm...The reason two deer walk together is that one has to take the mote from the other's eye...Life is mutual aid.

Another aspect which we cannot overlook is the relationship the individual has with the non-human. How one uses and views these things—natural objects, tools, the world in general—also contributes to the identity of the individual. This is significant because these ‘things’ contribute to the welfare or the destruction of the individual. Many African communities have teachings, practices and taboos that outline how the human being

should carry out their life around phenomena such as land, food, water, the forest, domestic and wild animals.

Fish and Fish (1995) have elaborate details on the heritage of the Kipsigis on this aspect, which transverse water, flora, flocks and herds, agricultural activities, food, salt, fire, directions, attire, numbers and names. Christian principles on how humanity should relate to nature have been examined at length. Again, reference can be made to the Genesis account where the human being occupies a central place and is given charge—not dominion—over the rest of creation.

The relationship the individual has with others is well covered in basically all pillars of culture and all dimensions of religion.

Challenges of Culture, Religion and Identity

As already noted, culture, religion and identity are quite intricate and can only be appreciated by those in the fold; indeed even those in the fold may often fail to express comprehensively or adequately enough what their culture and religion entail. This is because culture and religion have a long history and deep-rooted characteristics that cannot be broken down or limited to merely the here and now.

Religion, particularly the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical and social dimensions may be contextually ingrained that others may not easily comprehend or appreciate them. The experiential dimension being personal, is even more difficult to comprehend.

Given the supermarket of religions in the contemporary world, the individual may find it difficult to stick to one brand and this is what has led to what is commonly referred to as religious tourism. This is a challenge especially for the young people whose cultural set up is at crossroads between the indigenous and the modern, which are often at loggerheads. The young people observe their parents, who are equally in a dilemma and not quite admitting it. Assistance between the groups becomes an uphill task that is dismissed or ignored. Nevertheless, the search and conflicts do not go away; they keep snarling, searching and even shouting for attention and direction.

Another challenge is that some adherents of particular cultures and religions may assume that theirs is the better or superior one. They may

opt or be tempted to dismiss or look down upon others. This could easily lead to conflict and tension that can interfere with one's self esteem and peaceful co-existence.

Conclusion

We can hence summarize that culture and religion provide the identity of the individual in rather intricate ways. This is of great significance to the individual because it gives him or her cause, purpose and meaning for existence and for life. This also assists the individual to appreciate, map and protect their space, in relation to others. This calls for critical attention to the following issues:

- Culture and religion are a reality that cannot be wished or washed away. They have a strong and influential impact on the individual and the community.
- It is important that individuals appreciate these components of their being. Given that aspects of them, especially exposure and experience are subjective, it is equally important that the outsider does not judge or condemn, but rather attempts to understand why individuals or communities carry on as they do. And that which is carried out and observed may just be a reflection or manifestation of the inner, which may not be that easily understood.
- The variety of cultural and religions traditions is just a reflection of the rich, complex and dynamic human heritage, history and experience, which transforms often according to social situations and contexts. What this indicates is the increasing need, challenge and opportunity for dialogue amongst and between those of different cultural and religious traditions. This would help the individual refine his identity and appreciate that of others, thus contributing to a healthy society with people that are comfortable with themselves and with others. Such people would appreciate that who and what they are has a long intricate past. Their context is also paramount in determining who they are and what society is. And that one and all aspects of their lives are related and significant.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Circulation of media texts and identity (de) constructions in the post-colony

Christopher Odhiambo Joseph

Introduction

A meaningful discourse on identity formation and construction in post-colonial society, particularly catalysed by the agency of popular cultural productions circulated by media texts from Europe and America, must not only recognise the present cultural contexts of such productions but must also situate such a discourse within a continuum of colonial and imperial history. This colonial history disturbed, disrupted and ruptured an entire people's cosmic equilibrium. It is as a result of this ruptured history post-colonial African nations such as Kenya find their core values of life, and social characters of persons and community, perpetually competing with commoditized cultural productions from Europe and America, circulated through modern technologies of mass communication. As Edward said has most aptly noted:

One significant contemporary debate about the residue of imperialism—the matter of how “natives” are represented in the Western media—illustrates the persistence of such interdependence and overlapping, not only in the debate's content but in its form, not only in what is said but also in how it is said, by whom, where, and for whom. (1993: 21).

Perhaps an even stronger argument on the significant role of these residues of colonialism and imperialism in the (de) construction of identities is what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has described as a cultural bomb in the post-colony. He passionately argues that:

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their environment, in their struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it wants to make them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is

decadent and reactionary, all forces that would stop their own springs of life. (1981: 3).

Ngugi's assertion is that colonialism and imperialism have, as their project, a deliberate agenda to make colonial subjects feel that their pasts are a wasteland. To counter this past, they hanker for cultures, and by implication, identities and subjectivities of the more dominant Europe and America. This problem of a cultural bomb is further complicated by the unequal technological and cultural exchange between the West and America and the post-colonies. Through the commoditisation of popular cultural productions and their circulation through media technology, the North has steadily succeeded in influencing the lifestyles, mannerisms, identities and subjectivities of the highly consuming South. According to Edmund C. Igboanusi (2006: 181) the media have affected and still do affect our consciousness on several levels; they impinge our sense of time, our spatial configurations, and on our personal and social identities. Michael Real, cited in Igboanusi argues that the influence of media in (de) construction of identities starts right from the cradle and runs all through life:

From his or her earliest moments in the crib, a child learns to form a sense of personal identity, an emerging consciousness of existence, life and self, through interactions on three levels. First, the child interacts with persons...second, the child interacts with the environment...But thirdly, the child also interacts with stories read him or her, with pictures shown, gradually and increasingly with all that vast second-hand experience of television, books, advertisements, movies, posters, magazines, fashion, popular music, newspapers, radio, cassettes, phones, computers, and the rest of contemporary super media. These mediated experiences influence the child's developing sense of personal identity in the same ways in which interaction with other persons and environment does. The media exercise influence on the child, not only directly, by...all the products created in the image and likeness of super-media...the mediated culture becomes the individual's psychic and social context, from birth to death. (2006: 181).

Real's argument concerning the influence of media on identity formation and (de) construction seems to reinforce Ngugi's fears about this cultural bomb especially when the content circulated by the media texts are created and produced by the dominant cultures ideologies of the North. As Fred Mudhai notes:

...the major complaint against the electronic media is that there is unequal North–South cultural exchange mainly due to not only commercialisation and lack of financial resources and technological equipment but also poor or non-existent media policies. Unlike BBC, VOA and the German Radio fully funded by their various governments, virtually all national broadcasting stations in Africa—except, perhaps South Africa are not fully funded by their respective governments. This means that limited or no budget for productions, forcing the stations to even combine resources and buy cheaper second-hand (up to 10 years old) entertainment material made in Europe and America. The programmes are then sponsored by Transnational Corporations (TNCs) telling viewers to smoke, take to alcohol, to the discotheques—transporting them to an utopian European lifestyle that many of them may never live (1998: 127).

Mudhai's concern seems to be in tandem with Igor Kopytoff's ideas on the cultural biography of things and the commoditisation process when he especially argues that:

A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories (1986: 68).

These concerns about cultural productions indeed provide a site upon which an analysis of popular media texts circulated by the dominant cultures of Europe and America, and identity(ies) constructions in the post-colony are continuously played out. It is possible, for instance, to argue that the commoditised popular cultural texts produced in Europe and America and circulated in the post-colony are themselves templates of imagining identities and subjectivities. This kind of thinking is supported by Louise Althusser's conceptualisation of interpellation. According to Althusser (see John Fiske, 1982), ideology is ever-present in any form of production. Hence there is no way that one can escape ideology since we make sense of experiences ideologically. As such, the only sense that individuals or societies can make of themselves, their social relations, as well as of social experience is one that is the practice of the dominant ideology. Since all forms of productions have ideological implications and granted that constructions of identities and subjectivities are functions of power and dominant ideologies, it logically follows that media texts produced in Europe and America circulate their source ideologies and

identities to the consuming audiences of the post-colony. Indeed, this influence of the European and American popular media texts in the (de) construction of identities in post-colonial society cannot be underestimated because, as Mudhai (*ibid*) argues, the regional and continental organs like the Pan African News Agency (PANA) and the Union for Radio and Television Network (URTNA) are almost moribund due to lack of funds. The implication is that Kenya and other African countries do not have powerful media instruments to articulate and circulate their socio-political, cultural and economic issues in the face of adverse portrayal by Western media. Implicit in Mudhai's postulation is the fact that subjects of the post-colony have to be content with images, icons and representations circulated through popular media texts produced in Europe and America to construct their own lifestyles, identities and subjectivities.

The play of popular media texts and identity constructions

The relationship between popular media texts and identity (de) constructions always becomes problematic. The discourses on identity constructions generally tend to raise complicated questions because the definition of identity itself is never simple or straightforward. Mention of the word 'identity' incites questions on how exactly people construct identities. What are the different levels of identity formation? In responding to these questions one is in fact tempted to argue that perhaps the discussion should be on 'identities' rather than 'identity'. It is in regard to this definitional problem that sociological and post-modern scholars have argued that identity is not a fixed phenomenon, and as such, it is difficult to construct or maintain one. According to the proponents of these two schools of thought, identity constructions imagine a play of several factors such as dressing, music, speech, and "*fandom*", and that identity itself is the sum total of 'behavior', 'sense of self' and 'sense of belonging'. For Stuart Hall (1997), identity is never an accomplished fact as a production, but always unstable and in a state of flux. So what does this mean for subjects in the post-colony whose source of cultural productions—that would assist in identity constructions—have become one vast wasteland? More so, how do a people whose history is defined by dislocation, disruption and rupture construct cultural, social and personal identities in a world saturated with popular media texts circulated by more dominant

cultures of the West and America? It is in response to this history that subjects in the post-colony use media texts as templates to perform their identities or their possible selves or multiple identities. This is done according to the different images, icons and representations with which the media confront them. This ability to appropriate identity is well articulated by Keith Negus *et al* as follows:

Over the recent years many questions have been raised about the permanence of any characteristic qualities attributed to and maintained by individuals, groups of people and places. As individual subjects, do we have a core personality or 'nature' that remains unchanged over time or do we acquire, or make up or adopt new characteristics throughout our lives? (2005:329)

So, do such labels that are of social categories such as man, woman, Luo, Kikuyu, working class, black or white really capture the qualities and shared experiences that bind post-colonial subjects to a common identity? However, a more fundamental question has been whether these labels are a true reflection of an individual's identity or just labels or categories that are arbitrarily imposed on individuals. This brings us to the perplexing question: what exactly is identity? Identity has been described as an idea that gives an individual or a group of people a sense of who he is or they are, and how one or a group relates to others and the world in which one or the group lives. According to Kathryn Woodward, "*identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who don't*" (1997: 1–2).

Identity theory identifies three levels of identity whose Latin root is '*idem*', implying sameness and continuity. The first level is the essential core to identity, which, is created with the individual and is constant and unalterable. This is also referred to as 'inherited recipe'. The second level is the coherent identity formed in relation with other people, which develops and alters over time. At this level, identity is constructed through a network of social relationships. It is actually taught and learnt through the process of socialisation and daily interaction. The third level is one based on post-modern and post-structural thinking. Identity here is conceived as dislocated, unfixed, fluid and constantly in a state of flux. Those who define identity in this way argue that there is no essential identity but only one that is self-constructed by the individual playing with images, icons and representations that they are confronted with. As

such, the individual is considered to a multiplicity of identities for deployment in different situations, all which are constantly evolving to suit different social roles and needs. Whereas, from a sociological point of view identity is a function of socialization; for the post-modernist it is a construct, a variety of masks displayed to suit different occasions. Given these kinds of definitions of identity, subjects of the post-colony find themselves in a position where they must always construct their identities and subjectivities on icons, images and representations from outside giving the limited cultural produced popular media texts their circulations.

Media saturated 'worlding' and authoring of self in the post-colony

In traditional societies, it has been claimed that people were born into classes and even fixed into gender roles which involved certain rituals with binding characters that in turn, determined people's life and identity. In such societies, a person's social identities are relatively stable and changes in them are normally conditioned more by cultural values than individual idiosyncrasies. However in a world that has become increasingly 'democratised', 'liberalised', 'individuated' or 'individualised' and saturated with media commodified cultural forms--television programmes, films, sound recordings, magazines, news and documentaries, manufactured in a wide range of locations, and transmitted and circulated all over the world--individuals are testing out several identities, ways of life and styles. This is what has come to be known as the 'project of the self', a situation where individuals are 'authoring' their own lives and identities. In post-colonies, as a result of the history of dislocation, the project of authoring the self is made possible through the circulation of media texts that assists the post-colonial subjects to answer the questions: 'Who am I?', 'What could I be?' or 'What do I want to be?' Popular mass media texts through their cultural representations become very strong interpersonal socialisers in the lives of their fans, becoming an influential source in the construction and formation of their fans' identities, and in a sense, not only competing with but also subverting traditional socialisers such as parents, peers and schools. The influence of the circulated popular media texts in the construction of identities in Kenya since the 1960s has been both significant and remarkable. In the 1960s and 1970s the media images of African-American film icons defined the identity of young Kenyans signified through the expansive afro-hairstyle or

artificial wig then in vogue. This identity pointed to a larger political project of black consciousness, of black aesthetics and black identity. The images that were used to construct this identity were all received from film, television and popular African-American magazines such as *Ebony*.

In the mid-1970s, the film image of the Kung Fu martial arts star, Bruce Lee, largely shaped the identity of the urban youth in Kenya in terms of dressing, physical body looks and dress code. His walking style and speech became vogue. The identity of the 1980s was, however, fashioned on the image of the African-American music and dance icon Michael Jackson. His striking dance style and music of the then popular album and video version "*The Thriller*" totally consumed the identity of his youthful fans. Urban youth imitated his looks and dressing mode. Many fought to have the initial MJ as their nicknames. It was not uncommon then to see young men and women with a curly kit hair style and a single lock of a hair flowing down the face. They wore black trousers that barely reached down to the ankles to reveal white stockings, a white shirt collared with a bow tie to boot, a black waistcoat, black flat-soled shoes and the white gloves to complete the imitated image of the media icon. However this was not all. Dancing like Michael Jackson was the 'in thing' for these fans. The movie, *Break Dance* that starred Shabba Doo and Tony Shrimps in the late 1980s also influenced the social identity of the urban youth with many of them approximating the identity of either of the two dancing movie icons. It was common those days to see youth walking in groups with a music system which they would play in any open space and break dance.

Popular media text heroes and icons can be claimed to have influenced the criminal and violent identity of one of the most dreaded gangsters in Kenya in recent times, one Simon Matheri Ikere, who, after he had been shot dead by the police, a media reporter observed:

Two portraits that hang on the wall betrayed his obsession with violence similar to those seen in action-packed movies. A portrait of martial arts legend and actor Bruce Lee as well as another of former Hollywood award-winning actor for his role in action thrillers, Arnold Schwarzenegger, were displayed on the wall (*Daily Nation*, 21.02.07).

The Mexican soap operas, largely popular media texts, circulated through local television channels have also contributed immensely to the process of identity construction amongst those who view them in Kenya. A feature

story in the *Daily Nation* with the title 'Mexican soaps glue Kenyans to the screen' demonstrates the power of the media in construction or more precisely, in the imagination of identities. The article demonstrates how these soap opera icons and images influence the consciousness of their viewers as well as their personal and social identities. The article reveals that one Tracy Nyangiru is highly addicted to the soap (opera) *Rubi*, and confesses "*I'm addicted to the way Rubi plays around with men*" (*Daily Nation*, 17.02.07). Ms. Nyangiru identifies with the character and identity of the leading role in this soap, especially her manipulative antics. In the same article, we encounter yet another viewer, Doryne Acol, aged 30, who is influenced by the icons in the soaps to construct identity. For her, the soaps are templates upon which one can create identities. She is hooked to *Secreto de Amor*, to the extent that she has transferred the identity of the main character to her own baby, whom she has named Maria Clara Acol. She describes her association with this character in the following intimate manner:

I was taken in [sic.] by her tribulations of trying to get back Carlos Raul, her mechanic boyfriend and who had fallen in love with Barbara, his wealthy employee. Clara was also from an uninteresting background just like most of us, and I easily connected with her characters, ambitions and feelings (*Daily Nation*, 17.02.07).

These anecdotes confirm the role of popular media in the reception of ideology, culture and identity. This process of picking, choosing and re-imagining of identity is clearly explained by Owen London as follows:

...we may say that the actual ways in which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge govern the ways in which we can reflect on others and ourselves and thereby, define a field of possible ways of acting on others and ourselves (1994: 159).

However, a classic example of the way media circulated texts participate in identity constructions is dramatized in V.S. Naipaul's sketch novel, *Miguel Street*. The specific narrative that is referred to stands out as the most fitting metaphor of how popular media texts become sites for performing identities, the very projects of selves in the post-colony. In the narrative sketch under scrutiny entitled 'Bogart' we are introduced to a character by the same name. We however come to learn that this is actually his nickname and that before this he also had another nickname, 'Patience'

earned from the game of cards he played all along. Throughout the narration, we never actually get to know the real name or identity of 'Bogart'. He continuously projects and thrives on his 'borrowed' name and identity. Finally, we get to know from the boy-narrator how he probably got the name Bogart that becomes his defining identity. The boy-narrator reveals:

It was something of a mystery why he was called Bogart; but I suspect that it was Hat who gave him the name. I don't know if you remember the film *Casablanca*. That was the year when Bogart's fame spread like fire through Port of Spain and hundreds of young men began adopting the hardboiled Borgatian attitude (1979: 9).

We now know that Bogart's name is borrowed from a popular American film actor. This Bogartian attitude and identity develops further with the narrator revealing that "... *they were all worried. Bogart was hardly opening his lips when he spoke. His mouth was twisted a little, and his accent was getting slightly American*" (*ibid*, 13). Then finally, we are told that Bogart immerses his entire identity into that of his American icon of the popular film.

When he returned, he had grown a little fatter but had become a little more aggressive. His accent was now a pure American. To complete the imitation, he began being expansive towards children. He called out to them in the streets, and gave them money to buy gum and chocolate. He loved stroking their heads and giving them good advice (*ibid*, 25).

The narrative double fictitious character 'Bogart' is in a sense a profound statement on the influence of popular media texts circulated by the dominant cultures and ideology on the complex process of identity (de) constructions in the post-colonies. The experience of 'Bogart' also suggests that in the post-colony, self-formation and identity constructions indicate external cultural productions and ideologies circulated through the media. This is such that in the post-colony, the media has become a constant guideline and a major source and resource that subjects draw from and deploy in their projects of self-construction. Popular media texts that circulate in the post-colony seem to have become strong objects of identification to which subjects emotionally attach themselves to and eventually develop some form of relationships and connectedness to people and places they only know through media texts. These include pop music icons, talk show presenters, film stars and even common news figures.

‘Fandom’: Undermining national identities, privileging global identities?

It has been argued generally that the chief cultural forms and social practices that contribute to a sense of identity are essentially cultural. For example, people locate themselves with reference to a nation, region, city, village, residential estate and neighbourhood. More so, people use concepts of race, ethnicity and class which imply some correspondence between them and localities or points of origin. However, with the influx and influence of media texts and their circulations, this meaning of identity is increasingly being undermined. Through the globalising effects of media technology, people who not share any territorial points of reference have now developed a sense of belonging and identity with ‘the distant and different other’. This new order where a sense of belonging is imagined and no longer territorially constituted has been popularized by a culture that has become known as ‘fandom’. For instance, football as a culture of fandom creates a sense of belonging and identity amongst people and groups who do not share any territorial sense. However, the media enables them to imagine that they are part of the territory where the football matches are at that moment being played. This culture of fandom has been popularised mainly by the English Premier Soccer League. Fans in far off countries from the United Kingdom, such as Kenya, who support particular English clubs, strive at establishing identity with fans in the UK through paraphernalia to show that they belong to the community of those who support that club. They go to specific pubs that they convert into stadia and which are deemed as extensions of the actual stadia where the matches are being played. To make visible their identity and membership to the club, these distant fans acquire totems that make them feel that they belong to the family of their chosen club. According to Emile Durkheim as read in Jeremy Turner,

The totem is in fact a design which corresponds to the heraldic emblems of civilized nations, and each person is authorized to bear it as a part of the identity of the family to which it belong (59).

Fandom as an agency of identity construction seems to resonate with Stuart Hall’s ideas on cultural identity formations. According to Hall, there are two ways of thinking about cultural identities and perhaps by extension, national identities. The first thinking postulates cultural identity in terms

of one shared culture, a sort of collective of one true self, hiding inside the many others, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Implicit in this postulation is the sense of belonging and identity as functions of variables that include common historical experiences and cultural codes, which obviously are obfuscated by the culture of fandom that only imagines such variables and operates outside their ambit. However, Hall's second postulation on cultural identities seems to legitimize identities constructed through fandom as valid. In this postulation cultural identity is conceived as both functions of 'becoming' and 'being'. Through fandom for example, new forms of cultural and global identities are established through circulations of media texts where fans actively develop social relationships amongst themselves and with distant others without sharing of any real territories or historical experiences. This imagined and extended sense of belonging and identity is what undermines and subverts the frames of national identities defined in territorial considerations. Through fandom, national identities are subsumed by global identities. For instance, the American basketball icon, through the circulation of the NBA games has influenced the identity construction of his fans as signified in the popular haircut fondly referred to as 'Jordan'. This globalization of identity is also apparent in the naming of individuals, objects and institutions. The World Football bonanza usually circulates names of players and teams that are inherited for identity as seen in the names of *matatu*¹ in Kenya. The images of the Gulf War also provided names for *matatu*.

FM radio and the myth of national identity

In discourses of media and construction of identities, the FM radio stations in Kenya offer a very interesting dimension. They reveal the fallacy of national identity and the sense of nationhood. In a very subtle way the FM radio stations undermine the very notion of nationhood. Whether vernacular or otherwise, these radio stations privilege the idea of the nation as an imagined construct that is always in a process of becoming.

The many vernacular radio stations such as Kameme, Cooro, Ramogi, Kass, Mulembe and many others, through their programmes help in constructing ethnic identities. Through language and its attendant cultural productions such music, talk shows and theatrical performances they become sites of remembering and re-constructing ethnic memories and

identities that have been suppressed by the narratives of the nation and national identity. Whilst the vernacular FM radio stations re-construct ethnic identities, the more cosmopolitan English broadcasting FM radio stations such as Easy FM, Classic 105, Capital FM and Kiss FM bend more towards a global identity through their programmes. Although the language used by these cosmopolitan FM radio stations hover on the margins of vernacular and English languages, their programmes privilege the dominant European and American cultural identities. These FM radio stations are influenced in their modes of presentation largely by European and American styles of radio programme presentations. For instance, their jokes are mainly derived from a European and American worldview. More so, they bombard their listeners with detailed information of European and American celebrities; their dates of birth, wedding anniversaries, their latest adventures and their lifestyles. It is this kind of information that their audiences use in constructing their own identities.

Conclusion

The role of media texts circulated by the dominant cultures and ideologies of Europe and America in the (de) construction of identities in the post-colony can never be underestimated. So long as the post-colonies continue to consume commoditized popular media texts from outside their territories, the project of personal, cultural and national identities will remain elusive. However, the most worrying dimension of all this is that the circulations of media texts privilege the cultures from Europe and America. As such, identities in the post-colonies will always be construed and constructed upon that of those who have the technology to produce and circulate popular media texts.

Notes

² *Matatu* are public means of transport that have become popular in Kenya. They are the equivalent of taxis elsewhere. They have formed a culture of identification informed by names of celebrities, places and events. One will see such names as Ronaldo, Rooney, Michael Jordan, Madonna etc inscribed on the bodies of *matatu*.

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CHAPTER NINE

Sing me a Life: Music as a people's identity

Emily Achieng' Akuno

Introduction

Music is a composite entity comprising verbal and non-verbal sound expressions. In various cultural contexts, it is a multi-media event that involves the use of cultural actions, expressions and artefacts, all symbols that are produced and accessed through a set of senses. These symbols, imbued with meaning by the communities that use them, capture and disseminate ideas and perceptions of that community. It is a medium of expression that utilises a number of tools that are instrumental in the propagation and continuation of a civilisation.

Every society has values that are enshrined in and communicated through its preferred institutions and objects. Art forms and other cultural expressions serve the dual purpose of effectively embodying and communicating values. Music, a cultural art form, is a window into society. As an organ of culture, it expresses and reflects that culture, the sum-total of a people's existence. The events, concepts and expressions that characterise a people's existence are the essence of that people. Past considerations, events and activities inform the present and shape the future. The cultural heritage—that rich repertoire of expressions and materials—forms the basis for contemporary thought, attitude and action.

Past experiences and material provide the vocabulary for the construction of current perceptions and expressions. They shape and influence current existence i.e. identity and its projection. Each entity is unique yet common because of individual and shared attributes. Music, as a cultural phenomenon, is therefore uniquely tied to identity.

In this light, music is more than a body of sounds. It is a concept, an object of art and an event of socio-cultural significance (Akuno, 2005). However, its primary material is sound. Sound in its array of varying pitches and duration is selected and arranged to create a pleasing work of

art to the producer and user. Its validation is in its utility and application—the nobler the functions to which it is ascribed, the higher the level of significance of the work of art. The music derives its meaning from its function in society.

Music as a work of art has a dual function—recreation and ritual. It serves physical and emotional needs while addressing and cementing psycho-social and spiritual relationships. It accompanies the individual from sunrise to sunset, both literal and symbolic. In African societies, there is music for every activity. Indeed, nothing important happens without music (Senoga-Zake, 1986). In these activities, music's role is prescribed by the chief players, and ranges from accompaniment to initiator. There are instances where music provides a pleasant interlude to important events. Yet in some cases, music is key to the activities that mark the occasion, including worship and therapy sessions. Because of the intricate way in which music is woven into human existence, it embodies the essence of a people, portraying and constructing their identity.

Music as a Portrait

The Luo *nyatiti* player, Vitalis Oduor Nyagweno,¹ sings a song in which he narrates the settling of Jo-Luo around Kavirondo Gulf years ago. In this song, he says that when the Luo had settled, they said to themselves:

<i>Wadwaro gima nyalo mi'wa mor</i>	We want something that can give us joy
<i>Kata ka ng'ato onind' i lo</i>	Even if one sleeps in the soil
<i>Kata ka nend' imako nyar ng'ato</i>	Or if you catch (get) someone's daughter
<i>To bende ng'at achiel oduogo oleko</i>	Then one man had a dream
<i>To okawo ng'owu ogoyo piny</i>	He felled a fig tree
.....	
<i>To okete puye aboro kende</i>	And he put only eight strings
<i>M'ohulo ndalo aboro mege chuo</i>	That signify the eight days of a man
<i>Ng'a ma dichuo k'onnyuole</i>	When a man is born
<i>Ot ka onindo nyading'wen</i>	He spends four nights indoors.
<i>To yamo k'okawe odhiyo</i>	When the spirits take him
<i>Laru ka onind'e nyading'wen</i>	He spends four nights in the courtyard
<i>Mano ndalo aboro gi dholuo</i>	Those are eight days in Luo language
<i>Omiyo Ja-Luo kan'oloso thumeni</i>	So when the Luo made his lyre
<i>To okete puye aboro kende</i>	He put only eight strings
<i>M'ohulo ndalo aboro mag chuo</i>	That signify the eight days of men.

From a cursory glance, one picks out significant things about the Luo people of Kenya. Although the name of the music instrument is not mentioned, the word *thum* indicates that it is the *nyatiti*. The song explains its role in the community, indicating the functions that it serves. Indeed, among traditionalists, a wedding is not complete until *nyatiti* music is played. It is also used in entertainment during post-burial funeral rites. In this song, the instrument is also portrayed as a visual symbol of the people's existence. The significance of the eight strings of the *nyatiti* is their representation of the man's days: at birth, there are four days of confinement, and at death, the male lies in state for four days prior to burial. The song also states the instrument's origin—it came from a dream, or divine revelation and is therefore a sacred instrument. This statement alone signifies the deep religious nature of the Luo people, a community in which nothing happens, but all things are done.

It is significant that in one song alone, so much is revealed about a community. With a strong song tradition, where most musical expressions are in the form of song, i.e. sound and lyrics, Kenyan communities find voice in music as a medium of expression and reflection. Through the content of a song, one learns important facts that affect a community. We sing about the things we believe in, the things that threaten us, things that occupy our minds, things that make us happy, and things that confuse us. In fact, we sing about anything that is anything and about anyone that is anyone. Our repertoire of music includes songs about war, bumper harvests, road accidents, locust invasions, political alignments (and misalignments), religious experiences, spectacular events, and great leaders as well as impressive personalities. We extol virtue and vilify vice by praising the virtuous and ridiculing the malevolent. We pray, lament, speculate and optimise in song. Music gives us an opportunity to relive the past, savour the present and anticipate the future, through an analysis and expression of the events around us as perceived through our current understanding.

Society prescribes and allows for musical expressions for its members by age and experience. Traditional music forms are categorised as those for children, youth, adults and the old. The music reflects the activities that members of these strata of society involve themselves in. They address issues of significance to them; their experiences and issues from which

they learn the workings of their community. Song texts are therefore communal and national emblems, symbols of identity.

Music is primarily sound. The melodic and rhythmic nuances are a reflection of the spoken language, as they follow the tonal inflections and accents of the spoken word. Even non-song music material is an identity tag, recognisable by those who are familiar with individual communities' verbal expressions. The music becomes a mark of identity. The structure of the music, which often takes shape during performance or composition, is a reflection of other structures in the community.

Most song and non-song music take the call-and-response form. This comes in three strands. There is a structure where the call is repeated in its entirety by the response. In this responsorial form, the solo leads while the chorus listens and imitates. The second format is where the solo has a long call to which the chorus gives a short response, often syllabic or an echo of part of the solo line. In this structure, although the solo takes the initiative and leads, the chorus listens but does not imitate. The chorus, while not proactive, at least reacts to what the solo has said. Finally there is the design where the solo pronounces a short call to which the chorus has a long response. In this design, the solo prods and the chorus takes that as a cue for its own action, responding appropriately. By taking the leader's cue, the chorus goes on to state something significant. In the last two forms, there are often tutti sections, where solo and chorus team up and sing the same music.

These structural designs in music are a reflection of the various forms of administrative organisation that exist in our communities. They reflect leadership styles where:

- a) the masses take no initiative, but only imitate what the leader says;
- b) the masses get a lot of guidance from the leader, but respond objectively; and
- c) the masses take the leader's initiative and build on it.

The last two points are instances of joint participation, with an opportunity for consultation.

The designs are also a reflection of the stages or phases of teaching and learning in indigenous knowledge systems. Through apprenticeship,

learning takes place in three progressive phases. First, the novice imitates after observing the master's actions, with no variation. Once there is a level of proficiency especially in skill development, the novice observes the master, but is allowed and expected to react to situations that call for personal input. This is the second stage. Finally, the master or guru only gives a challenge and the learner is expected to take some initiative in responding by using the knowledge and skills gained in a creative way that solves the emerging problem. This is characteristic of indigenous knowledge in its broadest sense.

The other content of music is the dance movements, patterns and formations. Dance movements often reflect the movement of other inhabitants of our environment. Pastoral communities practise upper trunk movements, heaving to and fro, and leaping up and down. They seem to mimic the movements and gestures of the wild game that they encounter frequently. The dance patterns and formations also come from and lead to society's organisation patterns. Full and semi-circles, arcs, straight lines and clusters are common formations in indigenous and contemporary dances. These reflect the closeness or openness of society, the line of command, the recognition of a leader and room for individual contribution. The latter is reflected mostly in the spontaneous initiation of a new song by a new soloist, or introduction of a new musical theme, with everyone else joining in and the whole continuing amicably. There is acceptance within an agreed formula of order and respect.

Music says who its composers are by the occasion during which it is performed. People who harvest will have harvest songs. Hunters have a variety of music for the various stages of the hunt: assembly, forward march and celebration of success are communicated in song and dance. Likewise, contemporary musicians will be recognised by the type of music they sing and the venue at which they perform. The performance space and the platform for projection of the work of art, tend to be congruent with the theme of the work of art. Artists who are accepted as or proclaimed to be religious perform gospel and other sacred songs in religious assemblies. Therefore, artists who perform sacred music will be invited to religious crusades. Secular musicians tend to perform at several other festivities and contexts of a non-religious nature.

Music as the people's conscience mobilises for good or bad, depending on the artist's intention. Music is made because there is something to be said. By listening to the music of a particular period, it is easy to map out the social issues that affected society at that time, or events that attracted attention. Periods of political stress and agitation have song texts coded with messages that project ideologies of either opposition or ruling parties. African-American spirituals composed during the struggles against slavery talk of freedom and means of escape. They bear warnings to runaway slaves on possible perils along the way and instructions on how to proceed with the journey. During the independence struggle in colonised countries, numerous songs that were composed and sung bore messages of hope. The songs also strengthened the people, predicting an approaching end to the struggle, predicting victory for the oppressed. In these songs, the lyrics carry a meaning deeper than the ordinary usage of the words. The symbols, when decoded, inform and edify the intended audience.

In these and other types of songs, the people indicate how the various issues affect them. It is possible to discern a person's point of view or position from the remarks they make about the issue. In recent months, Kenyan artists have been engaged in the expression of ideas and attempts to woo people to various camps in party politics, notably the Constitution Referendum of 2005. Through song, the various persons and camps expressed and celebrated their position, indicating how the issues involved affected them.

In song, we also indicate how we view others and ourselves—them and us. We distinguish between what is familiar, and perhaps acceptable, and what is alien or foreign to us. Omolo Gabbie in the song *Nairobi* paints a picture of wealthy people in the city, by their attire, speech and demeanour. “*In Nairobi, there are so many big men*” is not an indication of physical size, but importance, mainly self-perception, or an indication of one's sense of self-importance. The phrase ‘*Mombasa Raha*’ is also an indication of one's perception of the lifestyles of Mombasa residents, where, as the saying goes, “*kuingia ni rahisi, kutoka ni tabu.*”² We glorify that which we think is beyond our reach, indicating our lack of understanding of how such things function.

Music as an Identity Constructor

In the traditional setting, folk music is made by all those involved in the event that calls for that music. There will be a leader, as in all activities, but most participants will join in the singing and/or dancing. Their part in the song and dance identifies their role in the event. In the celebration of the mass, and similar religious rites, the leader often intones the opening phrase of the music and the congregation responds. These roles spell out the identity of each participant.

There is special music that is performed by select persons or members of society. Membership to a group or society may be open, but some are closed. When one joins a society or social status, they can sing songs related to being in that group. Knowledge of the songs is an identifying tag. It does not get them membership into the society, but it comes with and signifies membership to the group.

In several instances, the performer's identity appears to shift depending on the music they are performing, hence the change in costume for modern performances. The full identity of the performers is reflected in their appearance and behaviour. Singers of hip-hop music, no matter where they come from, acquire a posture and dress code that appears global. This is characterised by a slight stoop, shoulders drooping and oversize jeans pants with large belts that have big buckles or overalls clasped over one shoulder, and designer sneakers. Popular musicians in Kenya of the dot.com generation also favour Rasta hairstyles. These fashions and costumes are not limited to the stage, but become the artists' identifying dress code.

'You are what you sing' becomes true when your song is an expression of what you believe or how you see yourself. Musicians, like other artists, tend to be seen as being different. One often hears talk of so and so having 'changed' since becoming a musician, particularly with popular music genres. Could this be a result of fame or audience expectations? The type of music one engages in spells out who they are. Both audience and media remarks influence the artists' self-perception. Yet the music style also categorises an artist as belonging to a social and age group. Besides, performance involves getting into character. Not many people are able to sustain two characters simultaneously or separate the artist from the

person. A dual personality is hard to maintain. Young artists ultimately find themselves becoming what they sing— in speech, gait and dress!

Kayamba Africa is a local male voices group that specialises in neo-folk music. They arrange traditional songs, rendering them in authentic and adapted styles of performance, thus according accessibility to a wider audience. They perform at corporate and social functions, singing songs from a cross-section of Kenyan communities. The group can be called a 'real' Kenyan group because of the representative nature of their repertoire and the performance practice adapted that reflects the cultural origin of their songs. They are an example of Kenyans making Kenyan music. Yet there are other artists of Kenyan descent, who make music of idioms and styles that are not originally Kenyan. Their renditions will however be Kenyan in nature, especially if their socialisation and music training have had a Kenyan flavour. These people make music Kenyan, and not just Kenyan music. Reuben Kigame sings gospel music in country style. His themes do not reflect the mountains of West Virginia as the late John Denver's did, but the Bunyore Hills of Western Kenya. This is very Kenyan indeed!

In composing their songs, musicians do not operate in a vacuum. With innate skills and concepts as well as their cultural heritage, they use sound and sound producing material in their environment and within their reach, creating music that is identifiable with them. Gospel singers brought up in the hymn singing tradition will often compose music that is strophic, often with a refrain. This may vary but the structure reflects that which is familiar to them. Olith Ratego sings contemporary music in Dholuo, reminiscent of *dodo* tunes that he must have grown up hearing. The Benga musicians of yore played their guitars in styles that imitated the playing of *litungu* and *nyatiti* (Otoyo, 2006). That which is familiar to the environment is harnessed in the creation of a new style, the creation of the new identity of the musician.

Identity and Music Taste—active and passive musicians

History reveals that the first Kenyans to undergo formal higher education were treated to Western music played on Western instruments and danced to in Western ballroom styles. To these people and many after them, this was music. Their experiences at a crucial age shaped their taste in music.

While some may be proficient at Western ballroom dances, many may not be familiar with the music and dances of their communities. That which they grow up knowing to be music shapes the audiences' perception of what is music. This may limit one's acceptance of other styles and genres of music. In this respect, one's experiences shape his identity and are key to one's perception and acceptance of a new sound phenomenon as music.

The active musician is a creator either as composer or performer of music. The artist creates music not from a vacuum, but by manipulating existing sound material in his/her external or internal environment. The external environment refers to what is available around us. This includes what is learned formally and what is absorbed unconsciously, hence training as well as enculturation. T.K. Njooora is an active composer of Kenyan art music of the Afro-classics genre.³ As primary music material, his piano, choral and orchestral music use themes derived directly from or constructed in the idiom of Kikuyu folk songs. This is reflected in the music itself, which include titles such as *Wakariru*, *Bendera Itu*, and *Kiere* all for solo piano. These works transport one to the slopes of Mt. Kenya as scenes of the villages and the rural lifestyle that contributed to their creation are called up. This is done through rhythm and melody that, despite transportation to a foreign medium of performance, retain their vitality and idioms through the arrangement and harmonisation used. In other less directly derived works, Njooora captures the essence of his themes by evoking feelings associated with the subject matter. *My Personal Journey* is one such work in which he paints his personal musical portrait. Here is a case of an artist who deliberately sets out to introduce himself through his music, giving a narrative without words. As mentioned earlier, we make music because we have something to say—about ourselves, the things that affect us, and the things that make us.

The performer interprets already created music, by attempting to decipher and communicate the composer's intention. This is done by reference to what is known of the style of music at hand, the composer's tendencies, and the performer's own experience of music in the specific genre. Deficiency in any one area is made up for by over-reliance in another. In many cases, the performer's experience overrides other considerations in informing interpretation. That experience, being an ingredient that defines the artist, becomes a mark of identity. Therefore,

an operatic soprano will sing the blues in an operatic way, unless otherwise educated.

In every work of art, the artist leaves a personal stamp, which is his own mark of creativity, distinguishing his composition or performance from someone else's. This is best observed in performances. Recordings of well-known songs, be they classical or popular music, are ground for discovery of personal styles. Conductors of symphony orchestras lead performances and recordings of classical works. Subtle differences in these recordings by different performing groups led by different conductors can be identified through tempo, dynamic shading and interpretation of ornaments. These result from the conductor's understanding and experience of the same. A good example will be recordings of Beethoven's 5th Symphony as conducted by Otto Klemperer and that by Sir Adrian Bolt. Similarly, recordings of classic pop music show differences in interpretation by artists. Consider the music of the late Jim Reeves and Charley Pride; Perry Como and Nat King Cole; and even more recently, Dionne Warwick and Diana Rose; Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. Some of these differences in interpretation indicating the performer's creativity may be a result of one's cultural heritage.

Every artist portrays both a common style and a personal style. The common style is a result of the external environment. It reflects the common practice, the current trends and may result from training and education. Nevertheless, people have an individual touch unique to them. No two performances of the same song are ever the same, for the performers bring in individual interpretation. The personal style is a mark and result of the artist's identity.

Several compositions are an amalgamation of idioms that can be traced to various sources. Syncretism marks the manner in which music material is selected and combined to create works of art. The current art and popular music scenes in Kenya are marked by music that merges the familiar with new information. These result in works that are reminiscent of the past while engaging the mind. The neo-folksong as practised by groups such as Kayamba Africa is a blend of old material with new styles that make the music acceptable to the old and accessible to the young. It is a refurbishing of the old folksong tradition for a new performance space—the concert hall or recording studio, for which the original music was not

intended and probably not suited. Through an analysis of the works of art, one takes cognisance of the source of material with which it is constructed, and acknowledges the personal and common touch that identifies its creator.

Emerging issues

It was once possible to talk about the music of a particular people. That music was marked by use of that people's language and music instruments. The music sounded like their spoken language, and created an atmosphere depicting their natural habitat, the environment in which they lived. With the development of the nation as we know it today, and with government policies that call for national unity influencing how works of art are expressed (in a language that will be accessible to all), artists are obliged to impose certain requirements on their works. In the music of the late Samuel Otieno of the Permanent Presidential Music Commission and those of Frederick Ngala of Egerton University, one hears Luo music in the Kiswahili language. What makes the music Luo is not the text, but the tonal and temporal inflections and nuances that are reminiscent of the spoken language. This is enhanced by the composers' mother tongue which dictates their musical thought. Issues on national policy and practice therefore impinge on creativity and result in new breeds of works of art that defy cultural demarcations, thereby resulting in ambiguity of identity. This is referred to as '*une musique sans identité*'⁴

Similarly, commercialisation and globalisation have had far reaching effects on music's place as an identity tag or symbol. Commercialisation has affected professionalism. Music becomes a commodity and is produced at the demands of a 'market' that is not necessarily sympathetic to the cultural dictates of the society that normally appropriates the music. Globalisation impacts authenticity, with hybrid genres coming up, so that what is today called a folk song is different from what was sung one or two decades ago. These two trends are reshaping the identity of Kenyans as music and musicians introduce foreign elements to which we are exposed and which we unconsciously or otherwise absorb.

In the world of the arts, is there true ownership of any material? Can one come up with a truly original piece? Will there be elements in a work of art that have never been used before? According to Solomon, son of

David, the answer is no!⁵ Each composer appropriates that which already exists in an individual way to come up with unique works that portray and construct their (the composer's) identity. In this respect, there is no ownership of materials of art, but only appropriation, and hence the borrowing that can either make or break both creativity and identity.

Contemporary music is the offspring of a new performance space for music. All music uses nothing but sound. It takes its identity from and gives identity to the occasion and function of performance. This is the performance space that it affects and it is in turn affected by it. Familiar space brings familiar agenda and creates familiar music to satisfy familiar taste, enhancing familiar identity by reflecting familiar ideology and philosophy. Conversely, foreign space brings in a foreign agenda and creates foreign music to satisfy foreign taste, enhancing foreign identity by reflecting foreign ideology and philosophy.

This is the challenge for contemporary education in the arts, music included. How does the school ensure that the content, context and processes of music as practised within the classroom result in or enhance and promote the goals of education while remaining relevant to the learner at individual, cultural, national and global levels? When the classroom is also a micro-cosmos as is the case in urban schools, the challenge is tenfold. Not only must the curriculum delivery meet the needs of the learners, but the goals of education must also be met. This calls for a meticulous selection of learning material.

Conclusion

Our aim was to chart the course of music in displaying and creating the identity of those who make and use it. As an organ of culture, music gives a glimpse into the worldview of those who use it. As a medium of expression, it is a language of communication that identifies the speaker and relates to the hearer, enabling the two to interact.

Okumu (2005) lamenting the colonisation of Kenyan popular music by Congolese musicians unveils a scenario where fears of Kenyans losing their identity is a reality because of the preferred music, as aired through the national broadcasting stations. Other concerns revolve around the role of education in propagating culture through avenues based on the curriculum. However, this curriculum does not necessarily support

education in the arts. It is understood that early and sustained exposure results in developing expertise. It is the accumulated experiences and knowledge that will define one's identity. This is projected and acquired, actively or passively, through the practice of music. As an agent for national mobilisation, music is a force that cannot be ignored. It is imperative that conscious, deliberate efforts be put in place to ensure the place of music in identity development, and the preservation of that which is Kenyan through the practice of music. Music, the language spoken and understood by many despite their circumstances, is an equaliser that bridges the economic and social gaps by bringing together people from diverse societies.

Notes

- ¹ Recorded in a private performance, Nairobi 2000.
- ² It is easy to enter, but almost impossible to leave.
- ³ Afro-classics is defined as a hybrid of African elements treated to Western techniques that result in a work identifiable by sound as African, yet produced through a medium or organised in an arrangement that is pro-Western classical music.
- ⁴ Translated from French as 'music without an identity.'
- ⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:9 '...*There is nothing new under the sun.*' New International Version, Holy Bible.

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Culture, Performance and Identity

Paths of Communication in Kenya

Our lives which are mainly structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior suggest that human activity is a performance; it is an activity undertaken with a consciousness of itself. We are always aware that someone who has certain expectations about us is watching. In order to satisfy the expectations we behave accordingly. Quite often we are conscious of projecting an identity – in politics, in our homes, places of worship, on the street, among colleagues and so on. But how does this happen? This book brings together essays which cover a number of key areas:

- Gender
- Disability
- Media
- Sports
- Literature
- Religion
- Language and youth
- Music

Through an examination of the situation in Kenya, the essays open new ways of understanding forms of local, national and global identity.



ISBN 978-9966-7244-1-0
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